**Starfall: teAR Drop**

At the Other End

*So this is the world…?*

…

A sole soul stared out amidst the darkness from his throne surrounded by the glitter of countless crystal stars, watching as their final flames of rebellion flickered in the wind, as their final brightness ebbed beneath the grasp of the deepest, darkest spreading night.

It was a scene. “It couldn’t be darker.” What emotions had he felt? Was he feeling over once again? The writhing tendrils fogged up every feeling sight—such that even he be eternally ensnared.

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But not for a particularly dull and steady glow that caught the center of his eye.

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Nightmare

Howls of carnage and human suffering permeated the surroundings. Having been purged of sleep the boy opened his eyes…only to close them shut as they were pierced by blinding light.

Still in a daze he sat up, slowly lifting covers once more. With the scene that entered his vision also came the understanding that he could not, and would likely never be able to, return to the blissful fantasies that permeated his youthful dreams.

Lighting up the scene was not the dawn of day shining in welcomingly through the windows, but the harsh orange glow of all-engulfing fire raging ferociously towards his home. As his senses slowly released from the chains of sleep, he felt the unnatural warmth sticking to his skin grow stronger, beads of sweat welling up between his budding hairs of childhood even as the crinkled cloth he wore cooked crisper.

“Waaah, waaaah…” The anxious wailing of a toddler came from behind. Turning around he saw his younger sister gently caressed twixt the arms of their loving mother.

A moment’s breath from calling out, he felt her stern gaze turn towards him accompanied by a silent finger placed to cracking lips.

She glanced nervously, as she might when looking for one of those unseemly black roaches that sometimes invaded the kitchen space. Despite measured care the hint of terror in her eyes did not go unnoticed.

Only once sure they were alone, with none to overhear them; only then did she dare speak. “You needn’t worry about a thing my dear. Your father has just gone out for the moment… to soothe the forest’s fury, along with the other men. Everything… everything will be alright…” Despite her best efforts to muster up the usual warm smile that oft comforted him from the scrapes and tussles of his youth, her usual calmness was nowhere to be found.

She had never been a very good liar.

Inquisitive to a fault, the boy’s mind jammed full of questions, but more than anything he just wanted to comfort his unnerved mother. He wanted to say, *it will be alright;* however, before the words could even leave his mouth billowing hands of blackened smoke crawled between gaps of woodwork to clasp his mouth, leaving him hacking in their stead.

Witnessing her darling son doubled over in fit, the mother could only gaze on despairingly, lamenting her own powerlessness. “Why—“ Not even her words would be spared as a pained shriek permeated the walls and the shoddily planked wooden door burst through, sending inflamed shards to all four corners of the room.

As his mother shielded the crying infant with her body he could only imagine the searing pain she felt must be multitudes of times worse than his own. Still, they were to be given no times to kiss their wounds as a gunshot echoed throughout the hollow interior.

Paralyzed, he watched his mother’s body crumple down against the wall, dragging a thin line of red along the darkened surface. Instinctively he moved to calm the wailing child in place of their lost mother, but even as he made to pry the tiny body from death’s rigidest embrace he could hear its shadowy footsteps of deliverance creeping ever closer just behind. Immobilized by fear, he stopped his tracks…and then the floorboards creaked to nothing.

It hurt to swallow.

Shielding his sister’s fragile frame with his own frail flesh he turned his feet by inches, until the narrowed edges of his vision caught sight of something more. An elongated shadow stretched out as if to engulf them whole—gaseous and rhythmic murmurs indicating the presence of something, not wholly human in descent.

Before he could muster the bravery to raise his eyes a sliver more he heard an impact, or a bounce… A small canister struck the floor tumbling on towards them. With a hiss it span in place capturing his feebling gaze as the pungent smell of chemicals wafted through the air…

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Skydrop

“…It would seem all are present,” from the heavenly throne a voice bellowed down. “Be grateful! Once little more than coarse rocks cast haphazard along the mud-caked roadside of life, tumbling aimlessly amidst heated sands and frigid snows, now those before us shine as genuine gemstones of the rough. You are the chosen ones who will undertake in this great feat that will remain a starring point in our nation’s—*nay this world’s history*! for all time.”

With nary a moments rest a symphony of clicking heels echoed wide the vast chamber. Twelve faces had been assembled: respect, devotion; all manner of zealous reverence clear as day— for all except one.

“As you well know, the duties lain upon you could very well prove fatal. Each and every one of you shown primary exemplars of courage and honor, such that we would hope all our noble citizens should strive to follow; and for that you have our eternal applause…!” A kinder, aged face splayed honeyed words luxuriously as to make naïve pride even sweeter, yet none suffice to ease the bitter sting overpowering one young man’s tongue.

Hezran Halter may have chanced himself participant in this unprecedented mission—this farce—but it was all he could do just to hide his *enthusiasm*. He knew better than anyone that denying the orders that had been given would result in more than a simple slap on the wrist. If anything such a display of disobedience would leave him greeting the next sunrise in some undiscovered corner—dumped never to be seen again.

In the first place he had never considered himself ‘one of them’, so much as to say he had his reasons. But those reasons hardly gave him any love for the king or his people. It couldn’t be more the opposite.

Hopelessly, he glared as whitecoats scurried left and right around him, clutching the clipboards and the vials of his demise. Disturbing notions began to take hold in his mind, *I wish they would all just burst into flames, charred black like the very heart of this city*, but thoughts were as far as mustering would take him. The sharp prick of bone piercing flesh; warm iron trickled freely down his throat, steeling his nerves. All the lengths he had gone to, every disgrace he had endured those many, many long and dragging years—all of it would be for nothing if he snapped.

“Preparations are complete!” Jubilant voices pulled Hezran back from his musings. With ready confirmation that everything was well on track the king nodded agonizing pleasure, presenting such a pleasant cushion that slipped the thought that one mere fist might be worth the royal clubbing that would follow.

“Good work,” flashing an exaggerated turn of hand, the king expressed his acknowledgement before dispatching his miniatures off to their proper squares.

Grudgingly, Hezran trudged in silence towards the darkness, one of twelve points surrounding a gaping hole of howling winds. Nothing could be seen of the ground that lay far below, nor even the distance that lay between. Only night’s blackness greeted his eyes from the void.

He knew little of what the experiment would entail; no doubt the others cared know less. Persistent pestering had proved exceedingly pointless, fetching little more than further incantations of ‘*utmost importance’* and ‘*only be accomplished by chosen few*’. Honestly all the empty flattery served naught but to flip his stomach further.

Before long his heavy boots had brought him flush the vanishing edge. *If my legs were any lighter I might just fly away,* as it was the leadened bars that served his bones proved just enough to keep him planted.

“Commence!” A single absolute command pushed from behind; seeming all the more arrogant given his newfound proximity to the throne. Whether by coincidence or otherwise Hezran had been guided right to the farthest edge, all but a few short steps of striking distance of that most loathsome of existences. He couldn’t help but chuckle silently at the bitter irony of the situation.

He was nothing more than a wild dog rendered harmless by the muzzle of his aggressors. The only reason they could display such brazen calmness was because they knew his fangs were sealed—what was truly infuriating was that in truth such fearful thoughts had likely never crossed their minds…

“Beginning phase one…” Following a bloated head’s first signal, several switches clicked rhythmic in the background as sputtered whirring spun to life. A blinding shaft of light descended dazzlingly down the towering ceiling high above, as if spilling from the heavens scaled infinitely beyond. The oppressive obsidian sphere dangling treacherously over the void absorbed and reflected the rays in their entire exaggerated splendor, leaving those assembled to bathe in reflections of their ego.

As puppets bound by string, cued by its imperious appearance before them, Hezren and his fellow conspirators lifted their arms with all the mechanical precision and unity of forever silent gearwork, leaving only a single veil of air to separate their open palms from the tyrannical suspension.

*Kuh*, Hezran felt a familiar pulse sliding through him, though its sheer size and forced paled anything he had felt before. His entire being tingled numbly with a sharper sting than sleeping limbs pressed hard beneath a weight. Every ounce of his concentration wore just keeping a quaking grasp on his slimming sense of self.

“All green…”

*Slimebags*…their most devoted rats cringing in anguish underneath; those bespectacled scopes still had the gall to smile confident and unburdened. Hezran’s vision may have well turned black under the scarlet tint of his already burning brain.

“Proceed!”

Joints crackling, veins of both red and blue popped treacherously to the surface. It felt as though every nerve of his body had been lit aflame, blazing steady fuses closer the bursting palpitations of his unsteady heart. It was a test of time, and endurance. Floodgates flung wide how long would it take. How many minutes—even seconds—would his body able to withstand the whirling mass of energy pouring in? Sweat dripped from his furrowed brow tracing streams of wetness down the parched landscape of his paled skin. Without capacity to rub relief he could only endure the salty sting of bloodshot eyes. Still… *Still I can’t let this break me, not and never; for her sake…*

Beyond his narrowed sight, a crashing echo rang hollow against hardened steel. And then what was one became two… and then four. Like fragile leaves ripped by vehement gusts of wind, once stolid vessels toppled as helplessly as a series of fragile dominoes, and before long the vortex was left threatening to rage free from control.

Torrential panic washed clean throughout the hall, leaking from a holey hull. “Continue.” Only the frozen cork of exceedingly cruel yet fearless command plugged the racket, worming itself through to even Hezran’s ethereal state of consciousness.

*1… 2… 3… 4… 5… 6……*

…

Hezran’s bladder filled to burst, and then the second he held deep inside as well as the third he had never known existed. All three trembled in delight when utterances of conclusion were finally made known. A deep breath and then release, Hezran felt every drop of energy that had until now battered relentlessly against the shallow barricade of the incomparably minute container he made up gradually drain as the link was severed.

Instantly an immense exhaustion took hold. It was as if he had walked endlessly across a barren desert, enduring both blazing days and frozen nights, without a drop of liquid life to console him all the while. As the remaining tension deserted him, so did his limbs. With the very last scrap of strength he could muster he managed to slam hand to knee, propping himself up just inches from the ground.

“A huge success!” As if restrained by floodgate, it was not long before clamours of celebration overwhelmed. *Celebrating even now, while those whose backs carried them to this moment are so drained… You would think they had at least the common decency to thank us…well, it’s not as if I didn’t expect as much.* A weak, self-deriding smirk gracing his face Hezran turned his head a slight to take in the fates of his fellow ‘batteries’.

That fleeting glance was all it took…

Eleven bodies lay limp against the ground.

Was it the meeker cousin toil…? If only Hezran could play fool to death. Their chests were silent. Murky liquid flowed thickly from their paler lips as drawn by gravity’s pull.

The obvious truth would spare no time in clutching its grim hold—not a single one survived.

The boiling acids in his stomach burned right up the tip of his tongue, their whitish yellow foam bubbling a noxious fizz on contact with the rusting iron near below. *Idiots…the lot of them! Why go so far? For blood or faith? There’s only so much plaster that can spread around!*

No stiches or stretchers, nor wreaths or wretches; not even a single tepid trickle of tear dropped from wetter eyes than his. “We are pleased well in accomplishing this. All that remains is to utilize the ‘cut’ made, and there is no doubt that you all will be held the greatest minds ever to grace the skies!,” only words of hollow gratitude that paid no mind or merit to the fallen flowed free as wine. Still, while the dead may be forgotten, it is the living that remain. Originally displaced from all but the largest limelight, one pair of sunken, squinty eyes remained held of the sharpness necessary to take note of the lonely left.

A regal wave swept silence over the jubilant crowd, “…Before proceedings are made, however, there appears to be at least one loose end still in need of tying up.” The disturbing words that carried calm to Hezran’s ears drew a frosty chill along his spine.

As if to confirm his misgivings the multitude of eyes displaced around the hall swivelled in legion to focus on his singular presence. More than a coincidence that he had not been included in the feverous celebrations; evidently death had been seen a foregone conclusion from the very start. “Come; face us.” No mercy was to be treasured beneath less harmless meaning.

Even so Hezran forced his battered body to motion, ignoring screams surfacing within. Regardless of feeling, he was not the one who held the keys; enclosed inside a half-crumbled cell, lain with bricks of hope and longing mortar. One misplaced step and he would be buried beneath. Whatever his jailor’s purpose Hezran could only hope compliance would garner some semblance of a grasp on what future might remain.

“Tell us your name?” Posed a question the apparent crumbling came to a stop, if only for a moment. Intent on extending what shelter unexpected ghouling had bought about Hezran endeavored a response…and yet feeble attempts at speech resulted in naught other than the flaccid flapping of his gums accompanied by slight, repulsive croaking.

*How dare you show such disrespect to his highness!, Speak!, I suppose it is only to be expected of one of such uncouth birth!, Damned worm!*:Line on line insults rushed through the tiny gaps of his ears as hardened mallets, needlessly ringing his already beaten drums till Hezran felt what remained of the malfunctioning mechanics of his already wounded spirit might be brought to death, though whether by fortune or not an immediate ending seem far from about.

Only after savouring the twisted theatre’s continuance till twice content did dishonest sympathy free Hezran from a puppet’s agony, “Hold! …It seems he lacks the strength to speak.” Ever maintaining the sovereign right of condescension, the crown’s golden gleam sneered down below attracting but a single grizzled fly to its holy, rotted fruit. Unintelligible buzzing impressed moments of enlightenment and understanding before the glass turned back on Hezran’s slumping form.

False gravitas permeated the hall as the king cleared his throat grimly with a titter of a nod. “…We have heard well. Although not originally one of the people, by our grace we chose to recognize the budding talent of one fragile body from a young age and had given training and position suiting. Normally an Earthcrawler participating in our sacred ritual would have been out of the question– Blasphemous! However; though it is loathed to admit, time played to necessity.”

Earthcrawler—it was a term Hezran knew all too well. Likened to diseased worms by those who flew among the clouds, no effort was spared in reminding those born from earth of their native position beneath them, crawling in the dirt.

“Very well, we have decided. A great occasion merits a gratuitous offering, especially for those reside so close to the other side.” Not a moment of contemplation passed for the king slapped his palms together joyously, as would a child on devising a particularly entertaining play to pass the time. Unfortunately, his amusement was not to be wholly shared.

*You need not go to the trouble my liege!, It is much more than he deserves., Blessing an Earthcrawler with your words, let alone a boon…, You are much too kind!*: In true dramatized effect a fainting spell weaved its way across the room. Even those left untouched by the fairies’ dust were left at mercy of their jellied legs.

To them it must have been as if a benevolent god bestowing a particularly twisted and unsightly lump of wood with the gift of temporary life; but Hezran who knelt beneath could see naught but a malicious devil weighing his hope, together with his very soul, as equal to little less than a hollow glob of nothingness. The touch of rage that simmered silently beneath the surface of his mind scarcely served as a hidden, yet heated, repellent to the king’s most icy glare.

Objections subdued a warm satisfaction bathed the hall once more and with a nod and a whisper the inauspicious aid of the throne vanished into shadows before reappearing in servitude with hands raised high in presentation for but a brief moment until his purpose had been fulfilled.

For the first time the king took up his own two feet in place of a more luxurious four, swishing his royal robe with grandeur as he came to head. Displaying a previously proven a penchant for theatrics, large, measured steps marked his protracted approach. Step by step the king came closer until at last he stood as colossus, towering hoveringly over Hezran dwindled form.

An exaggerated flourish; an ingenious sleight of hand, suddenly an object was propped up near blindingly before Hezran’s eyes. It held a shape that could be described as many things: an egg, a seed, a drop of vital liquid; however, its colouration was anything but. The deep obsidian luster of ebony night was interrupted by countless milky veins of starry white.

“Do you recognize this?” Needless to say Hezran had never even seen anything such before; as was no doubt already known to be the case. But it was against human nature to refrain from presentation a great treasure.

In the presence of discovery no rhyme or reason held light in the king’s eyes which sparked of uncharacteristic glee and entrancement, betraying their own sunkedness. “Tis a key! A key with which I—we—will bring about the glorious accomplishment of our lifelong dream! Everything— Everything! will be made right… as it should have been…” With a *we* that hinted more than royalty, the trace of delirium whispered of the king’s cryptic words went unheeded. “Together with this key and the tear created here, we will be able to control and mold the past! Finally this broken plain of life will be put to rights!” The king cooed exceptionally pleased with his deranged soliloquy, while all the faithful oohed and awed their delight in having given themselves completely to the cult creed. It felt as if Hezran were the only sane person in a realm of madness…or perhaps the only lunatic in a rational world.

“And to that end both you and your kin have been especially great contributors to our goal. Indeed, we are to be thankful.” There was something about the king’s tone that struck an exceptionally sour note.

“…Kin?” Fear forced a single word through Hezran’s cracked voice.

“Oh! Of course, you would not have known!” As if reeling from shock on committing a painfully plain and yet apparently amusing blunder the king bent back ever so slightly, holding one hand lightly over his eyes in an insulting gesture of carelessness. From behind the king Hezran could see the shadow once again return; this time carting forth a mountainous clump of oozing malice out front. Whatever lay on top was curtained over such that only the smallest corners peaked on through, yielding sights of metal and glass and a touch of green fluid that lay within.

*It… it can’t be…* A sense of dread, surmounting any Hezran had ever felt before, pooled to the brim. As desperate as he was to look away—to ignore the inevitable revealing taking place in front of him—when the magician’s swipe brought down the curtain Hezran found his eyes glued taut the horrid receptacle.

*No… No! No! Nooooo!* His mind screamed in opposition with all its might, so much so he hardly felt the pain of blanched nails piercing whiter flesh. Suspended amidst the fluid, freakish and unearthly, an uncanny abomination stitched together by deranged hands as if by string and superglue. Its body twisted to and fro, some parts human and some parts hardly so. Where blotched and mutilated skin failed to show, yellow and red were brought to the fore. Yet still, even so, this was one monster he would never mistake: not the still paling glow of that once joyous face nor the molten rivers that seemed to stream from those scaled eyes.

“Happy greetings, is it not? As he in this day she before served her way. In mere coincidence, a stroke of luck—no perhaps it’d be better called ironic fate, that those of such tainted blood prove such value to our pursuits. In spite most just deserts, it brings a tear to even our own eyes. What sadness! The brother offers us his soul and the sister offers us her flesh. A family that simply cannot be praised enough. How sad then, that both must leave so soon.” Fictitious anguish wallowing in deep-seated hatred, the king’s weeping only aggravated Hezran’s gushing wounds.

*Again and again…* *Was this really all we were born for? To be used up unthankfully as tools, deprived of our humanity and what miniscule happiness we manage to keep grasp.* But even as the mucous of despair coated his mind in numbness, a seething fury flared up stronger. *You took my home. You took my parents. You took my sister! …And now you will even take me.* For all the torture and disgrace, all the suffering and the pain; nothing was left, not one single thing. *Is that how it’s going to be…? Is this how it’s going to end…?* His canines ached with a feral hunger. *Not a chance! I won’t let it! …At the very least I’ll drag you down with me as well!*

Mind enflamed, Hezran no longer felt the knocking aches or tuggings of exhaustion. Dredging upon an unfounded pool of strength he lunged out towards the unsuspecting sovereign pulling knife from heart. A family heirloom more for ornament for than practice, its silvered surface interrupted by apparent smokey clockwork holding glassy sheens all inbetween, a quick glance told little of any sharpness. Still, blunter edges had severed bone and for one trimming the sharpened blade of rage would prove lethal yet enough.

“Perhaps we shall even have a memorial built to your favor. Hahahaha—” Unaware of his assailant, by the time the king noticed the rabid pup rushing with hysteria; it was already far too late. Faltering mid-bawl, no resistance could be offered beyond tripping backwards over his own two feet in rushing to escape.

A piercing whistle screeched.

Ironically enough, though an awkward stumble, it was that very clumsy display that separated head from hand. In place of a guillotine’s beheading, a crimson line traced faintly across the king’s still extended wrist and then a splash of red as the smaller separated from the whole. With hand released from body so was egg released form hand, the blackened oval gliding back towards the void. “Aaarghh! Guards!!!”

And in that moment stone sentinels streaked forward brandishing their silver spears. Thousands upon thousands of pricks pierced painfully about Hezran’s body, until there was hardly a spot that was free from sting. One of them must have been carrying a sword because as he stumbled amidst thick streams of blood Hezran could see one hand fly as a stump of his own dragged out before him. Just as quick as it had come, Asura’s blessing left him empty. Punctured lungs cried of agony, but only the instrumentals of flowing air were returned as Hezran fell, down into the endless darkness…

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Ego Confine

“…Next.” The melodious cacophony of countless links of chain binding innumerate rust-red iron rings resounded. Dragging slowly forward, repeating as it had endless times before, the links seemed to stretch on forever; so long the boy hardly recalled the brief wetness and littering of chaps left shortly in his wake.

Waking up from dreadful night into a room without light, no thoughts came immediately to mind. It was cool and damp; unlike the searing flames of hellish mares that hounded out his sleep. A dark day’s dreams brought starry hope, a hope that a milder warmth lay somewhere close; but no sooner did he reach out towards the wishing rock did it comet quick right out of sight, vanishing into nothingness.

Tumbling over moistened limbs his hands scraped painfully against stony skin. As his plunge came to a stop, wrenched straight between two solid blocks, an agonized moan slipped free. One by one he relaxed his palms to spit relief. Nervously he glanced to the left and the right wary of scalding, but the only heat he felt came from within. Briefly calmed he crossed his arms, placing one palm over next, tenderly panning his way on back. One wall turned to next and closely then gave way to less. Moisture and stickiness; the dry, cold wall traded for a gelid clasp of clammy flesh.

Cooled all at once he recoiled backwards, a thick sense of sponge and ooze clinging as bumps to his skin. Crouching fetal to his contemplative corner bare lines began to form before him. First a foot, then a leg; then a hand, then a body; finally the sickly paleness of a face devoid of hope, the reddened soreness of eyes long since cried dry. Before long his own weeping cleared sight to a dozen mirroring reflections, all but cramping what little air remained.

There was no way to tell how much time had passed as he waited in silence. No one spoke. Only the shallowest sounds of breathing were made barely audible to his ears, slipping in and out like constant ghosts of whispers. Time seemed to stretch. One second seemed like one minute, each minute felt like an hour, and hours felt like days. Sore limbs became sorer. Sitting became unbearable, but there was no space to stand. Hunger ate away at his bowels, but there was no source of satiation to be found. For what seemed like an eternity he faded in and out of consciousness, flickering between life and death; but before the final knell could reach his ears a louder bell brought him back to hell.

The boy turned his head towards the din, making out a stream of curses through a trembling slit. Before more ill-fated lines could usher in, a crash and a crunch, with a brutal swing the iron bat came down in full. A splosh and a splash, from the nib of his nose and straight down to his toes, mucous with chunks painted vivid robes of cardinal red and sloppy ivory.

“God it stinks in here!” A bulky leather boot stepped in through the gap onto its battered imprint upon the twisted steel. It paid no mind to the grisly grime, grinding mercilessly till fine powder stained the floors.

While dehydration left those held with lacking in fluid response, the second shadow proved less resilient to the devil’s art. “Urp… Isn’t this…isn’t this a little much…?” Little did small sympathy earn but callous wonder.

“What are you going on about? These are the pests below pests, the weak of the weakest. Hit them! Cut them! Break them! …Use them! It’s the hardest bit of fun we’ve earned.” Falling beneath that cruel light, a length of malice struck out towards the boy, but when the crack struck to its tip only sound hit his ears.

“If too many go missing it’ll be *our* heads on the line.” Caught in a trembling hand the length of cord and metal trembled only slightly.

”Tch… You’ll be changing your tune soon enough.” The prey unflinching beneath its glaring yellowed eyes, the snake pulled back its dripping venom. “All right, show’s over… Get up!!!”

Not one still living soul dared to disobey.

“Less than expected…” A mild tapping at the hip, the source of displeasure could not have been more obvious. Dumping cluttered clumps of steel it was not long before barbed fingers prodded impatiently. “C’mon! Step into it!”

*One by one eager clamp those heavy shackles, lest toothed grin turn to fang*. Finally his turn, and stood for last; the boy stepped forward in his place and grasped the circlets searing cold. Suddenly his vision split in two, his hands shook, and wobbling he slipped just short of knees. A licking of the lips, red gaped even wider; and once again the tinge of iron came but not his own.

“…You really are a spoilsport.” Fed up with compassion, the demon turned around and marched off through the other side, dragging the others chained behind him, leaving only the boy and the shadow that remained.

“Are you all right…” The ruffle of a clumsy hand beneath downcast eyes that peered straight, a twinge of a smile exuded honest kindness. “Ha, who am I kidding? Of course you’re not.” Even so the fettering hands that reached around the boy’s ankles stuck tight and true. “I’d be glad if you didn’t hate us too much.” Selfish as literal, but selfless in truth; the bottled message was left to float in stormy seas.

Already yet they passed a spell, fumblings of hesitance delaying sure end, but as sure as time proves infinitely impatient for all that stalk its thread, a click came from the periphery yet unseen as two extremes were made as one. “There’s th—” But no small victory comes without a price.

The shadow—the human—heaved his chest in fit. He bent down to cusp expelling from his heavy lungs. Once, twice, three times he quivered at the back. “Ah, what to do? …I’d really rather not ruin them if it could be helped.” Raising his face back up again he pondered a moment the putrid pooling that dripped beneath.

“…Why?” Before he knew it himself the boy had already reached out to stem the flow of fatal droplets from pale lilac lips.

Puzzlement before warmth, the caretaker took those tiny fingers in his own. “You know it may be impossible to change the past, but that’s why it’s worth it carving out a future, whether our own or for someone else.” There was not an inch of falsehood or insincerity to his words. “Keep this for me, will you?” It looked like a jewel. “It’s a shame I won’t be able to deliver it myself…but better spent a bit of sweetness in one’s darkest hour.” Even now he smiled. “Now, please go.”

The boy was sent ahead alone. And so he had come this…having tread so far along the branchless path he now stood at the breach.

“Hurry it up! You’re keeping!” As the portal shuttered open a rough kick from behind propelled the boy towards the gap, sealing him to face a fearsome fate.

At first he remained still, crouched down to the ground, his spine stiff with quivering noise. Beneath covered eyelids sunk a greenish tinge and through his ears an incessant buzz. *This is the next one? Hardly looks promising. We’ve really had slim pickings this harvest time around.*

*Words,* the boy pricked his ears, but no matter how intently he listened he could not find their source. *Pointless complaints. Whether its scrap or not, we’ll find a use.*

They seemed to echo in from everywhere and no amount of picking could plug his ears.

*Point taken, but don’t we have enough material already.*

*Then we could burn it for fire. You’ll never be full-fledged if you’re so wasteful.*

*Like that dog with the extra head?*

*Shush… If the head hears you, you might be missing one.*

There was no malice in their cruelty and soon the boy found himself loosened up in spite himself. Transparent walls that arced up above, splashes of color constantly changing as symbols both familiar and less so ran their way around. On the other side he spotted several men and woman with steaming cups in hand, their lips moving naturally as the voices flowing in.

*Well… I suppose it’s about time we start.* Sighing of boredom, hands found their rest and apathetic sights trained inwards.

Shivers.

*Huh… Damn, the mic’s on. Such a pain…* A misunderstanding. Rather than the words it was the eyes: those terrifying eyes. Exposed beneath those swivelling sockets probing up and down there was nowhere to hide; just like an insect flailing helplessly on its back as the scalpel peeled inwards. *I told you!*

*What does it matter?*

*You know as well as I! Resistance can make yielding results…more troublesome.*

*Yes, yes. I’m sorry.*

Quarrelling over so much concern, not once did they bother to stem the source.

“Sorry about them. I promise it’ll be fine, so why don’t you open up a bit.” A mellower tone coaxed the boy from his fortress walls, if only slightly.

*Appreciate the help, but there’s no way you can guarantee that; especially not now.*

“It will be fine.” There was no reason to believe. They had destroyed his home, massacred and pillaged; now both father and mother were gone. Maybe not them, but their neighbors, their friends or their families; they were the cause. Still…*to carve out a future…*

“Good.” The floor beneath lit up and looking down the boy saw a starlit sky, dottings of rainbow jewels. Pulsations charged the air and staring deep within the shining allure he felt himself pulled in, captivated.

*Oh…!* Noting a reaction, the atmosphere changed completely, but the boy was hardly conscious. Mind leaving body, first there was static and then… *Hunger. Anger. Pleasure. Joy. Sadness. Resignation. Hope.* The boy knew. More than just stones they were alive. Each and every one of them had their own individual will and memories, striving to assert dominance in their existence.

“Anymore and he’ll break!” Endless throbbing, his head felt filled to burst at any moment, but still the boy could not look away: he could not escape the current drawing him in.

“Hoh, interesting. Continue.”

“S-Sir?!”

“Where there is a will, there is a way.”

*Maybe this is fine…* The boy was exhausted, tired. Maybe it would be better to just give in to this tidal wave of feeling and let his self be swept away.

*…protect…* He remembered: a final whisper, a wording of the mouth.

*That’s right…* He still had things to do. He needed to live; if not for himself then for someone else. People might mock his convictions, the fact that the desire he chose to follow was not one created of his own; but in their taking the stones had taught him something well. *…this is my selfishness!* A fissure formed between the melding minds and suddenly he was thrust from the current, dropped limp on the floor.

Calls of alarm came from beyond the glass, but amidst it all one odd figure cast a grin wider and more eerie than the Cheshire Cat; its silent laughter haunting him as the boy faded away, beyond the glass…

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Emptiness/Black Hole/ Black Hole and Emptiness

It was cold and dark, so dark he could not tell top from down; or if there even was a boundary to the space to begin with. His hazy mind failed to orientate itself in his fall…was he even falling in the first place? Had it all been a dream, or was this the dream now? Was this the beginning of the afterlife of which he had seen so little yet heard so much about? *…Not that it matters anymore.*

It was at that point that an eerie chuckle emanated in his mind. *Are you not a little young for it? At your age if you’re missing something you need merely fill it up again.*

*So now come the voices…* Well that was to be expected. Whether he was alive or dead, living the kind of life he led and with the kind of end he remembered, a second ego was hardly worrisome; even if it betrayed the sense of mood.

*How rude. Perhaps a small reminder is in order!* Many vital holes once again made their acquaintance, instantaneously spurting forth countless specks of torture that he had so selfishly neglected to savour before.

*How do you feel now?* The surrounding vacuum failed to convey his response.

What do you mean how do I feel? Such a thought did not even cross his mind. Emptied of adrenaline, he was forced to feel the pain in full, and then some more. He could not have cared less what they voice had say; his wish was simple, all he wanted: *Just— just make it stop!!*

*I am glad! You seem quite healthy.* Ignoring the sheer absurdity of this mouthless back and forth, apparently his voiceless screams had yielded fruit as the pangs subsided leaving only burning hotness in their place. But then again, that was more than strange enough in itself.

*Ah, that’s right…* He had been pierced through; good as dead. There was no way he should still be breathing and yet…even so his mind still turned.

*It really is an ironic twist of fate…that even a fake can become close enough to the real thing…* Bathed by somber timbre a tinge of colour caught his eye.

*What…?* Previously forgotten, the egg-like object cut from the cursed king’s grasp now floated ominously alongside; the white veins that once laced its obsidian surface now as crimson as fresh blood. *…like a beating heart.*

Somehow that last thought seemed to have feathered his unseen companion’s most humorous bone; to the point where the limpest hairs along his arms stood at attent. *I apologize; it is just so amusing that you would think so, knowing nothing of how close to the truth you truly are.*

Maybe he had gotten used to the situation, or maybe he had just given up trying to understand it, but in his comfort the mild mocking drew just enough annoyance to elicit response. *If you’re so eager why don’t you just spit it out? It’d be a shame if you choked before we even got to know each other.*

*Thank you graciously for your concern.* Evidently he was the less experienced in such banter. *To put simply that there is something that should not exist. Like how a shadow mimics that which casts it under the sun shining overhead, this manufactured core should have stayed just that, a silent mimic. However, now the ‘egg’, until recently hibernating peacefully somewhere between life and death, has been given a spark.*

*Ah…* Terrified he watched as a rippling pool of red spread out towards the ‘egg’, eager to lap up the bloody light despite its pointed lack of fangs.

*I think it might like you a little too much.* Frankly he was disgusted. Something born from his family’s flesh and blood still hungered greedily for more scraps. He had half a mind to strangle that tiny, newborn life till naught one drop remained. Unfortunately, phantom fingers could press no feebler.

*Now, now, it won’t do to be so bitter. You can hardly blame an object for being as it was made.* Though sound in logic, the knowledge hardly lent comfort to the mind. *In addition, through its own existence yours also has been allowed continuance.*

What did it mean? He was not sure he wanted to understand.

*Stop!* An affection flick to the forehead came to mind. *If you’re going to be like that then maybe we should let it end here.* At this point he could practically envision a pouting face to match.

*…Then please.*

*Good, good!* The fuzzed nuzzle of a trained mother left him feeling younger than his latest memories of his own would ever have allowed.

*That said it really is exactly as it sounds. Propped full with holes more plentiful than those of a man nailed limb by limb to a cross, time was one thing your body did not have. And that is why it was only the more ironic that you two should happen to fall together to your fates. Where alone neither would have survived, together a contract bound by blood was formed. Fading lives intertwined together into one… saving either from extinguishment…* They and this one as well, was there really a need to be so longwinded. Occult summons could only hold so much before they grew tired. *Sorry, did I bore you?* Still it hurt his heart having someone pick his mind so easily. *In summary: you should be thankful.*

*Really…* Hezran did not know whether he should be thankful or not. Sure he might have life, but everything he had fought to protect so long had gone and left him behind. *It probably would have been easier…*

*Seriously, you really are pitiful.* Somehow the sullen mocking seemed as drenched and real as his own. *But even more so that is the reason you can’t stop now. Can you still see their faces? What would they look like if they were in your place? How would you feel if you had to watch them throw everything away, over and over again, knowing that you were powerless to stop them?*

*I know…* He knew; he had to keep living on, as long and strong as he could, else he could never look them in the face again, but more than that—

*As long as you understand.* Tears erased in a matter of seconds. *In any case your reasons need not matter, after all as long as you live there are things to do.*

*And why should I be doing things these things for you?* Not that he had any particular intention to resist. But just bowing did not suit him either.

*I can bring it back any time.* The mere remembrance of the pain made him flinch, though fortunately it seemed they held common ground where it came to lackings of intent. *I kid. Watching humans react is a never failing entertainment.*

*Suspicious…*

*As you would do well to be, however, in this case I hope you listen with open ears. There are only two things I require of you: the first that you look after your newborn here—*

*You make it sound as if I’m the one giving birth.*

*Last I checked you lacked the faculty; though I’m sure it could be arranged if you so desire?*

Surely she made jest, but was he really going to be the one to test*. Never mind… Continue.*

*If you’re sure…* Was it just his imagination or was that disappointment directed towards him. *As your second task I would have you give someone I hold near and dear a much overdue spank; god knows I can’t do it for him anymore…*

If it was not one it was the other: by the end of the day he could very well be up to his arms in infants such to make any day’s carer cry. *I don’t suppose you’d be so inclined to tell me who this person is either…*

*You catch on quick! It would not be nearly as fun if everything was known from the start, yes?*

*I sure as hell hope you’re not looking to me for agreement.* But in all honesty he already knew full well he might as well hope to climb up a horizontal span of cliff barehanded than get an answer straight.

*It looks like time is up.* Still with so many questions left unanswered, Hezran felt something other than blackness begin to envelope him from behind.

*Oh, there is one more thing I forgot to convey…* They were words. It was impossible to know if they were the truth. …But how he so desperately hoped he could believe.

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Mirage

Awaking from forced slumber, the boy was greeted by a view far displaced from damp grey walls or glaring lights. Neither present were the rough touch and loamy smells of patched timber that permeated of memories before. A mellow, milky light damped the brilliance of the still whiter walls surrounding the windowless room—even the snowy sheets that cradled him deep in their embrace carrying a similar whitened hue, bringing mind the endless bounds of purgatory.

He lay silent, floating blankly amidst the space that contained him and him alone. Closed to the world, both heaven and earth, his mind lay empty, uncertain of what to come. There was plenty to consider, but worth of thought failed to materialize; at least until the dull alarms of invasive footfall oozed between yet unseen cavities.

Returned to the living, he panicked. The interim peace of forgotten memory collapsed, flooding his mind with joys turned foul by disaster’s breath until within the calming colours once reminiscent of angelic plumes all that remained to his eyes were crooked outlines of twisted ivory gleamed sinisting between upturned pale lips, clicking in manic euphoria.

The boy dove still deeper yet within the mountainous snows, suffocating himself beneath the quivering desire of escape, but the biting gleam only grew brighter as he fell. Empty gasps grew tight and rapid as aching fuzziness whited out all grounded thought; however, before the final freeze would turn him blue, a burning clutch melted through powered snow. “That’s dangerous!” Anger, such more heartfelt seemed long and far away; the clean-shaven stern face of a studied man looked genuine.

“I can’t say I approve,” mismatched words to accompany a stranger’s tight embrace. “I’m glad you’ve woken up.” …no that was not quite right, though but briefly, a single remembrance stirred. “There’s no need to be afraid. Everything will be fine now.” With same words and same voice that made calm beyond the glass the boy’s shaking limbs began to still and steady breathes gradually took their turn.

“You’ve done well.” Released from the sturdy arms, the boy felt a comforting brush sweep through his hair. “I’m sure you have a lot of questions, but there are a few things I need to tell you first.”

The man took the boy by hand. Was he going to lead him back away? Surely, just beyond the door he would find the forests and the groves, still smelled of summer fruit just past springtime’s fragrant breeze.

But the man didn’t take him there. The am stopped by a chair and had the boy sit before turning and staring straight into his eyes, a wince showing how well were known his feelings. “This is your new home; you won’t be going back.”

With the dashing of hope all at once renewed light seemed to fade, leaving only in watery pools reflections of firm sorrow.

“That said you won’t suffer either—least not as much as any youth brought here could hope…” A half-hearted promise lacking in meaning. That nervous turn of head could only mean one thing for others survived like him.

*Ah…* Crestfallen, a new calmness took hold as the boy remembered his purpose. “That’s not important! Uh…”

Wary of his unconscious animosity the boy cowered holding his free hand powerlessly above head. But the man just smiled, a sad smile.

“There…there should have been a girl—smaller…with me…?”

“I…don’t know. I’m sorry.” The man’s eyes remained indecipherable and there was a tremble in his voice. “But I can at least give you this…and my promise that I will do everything I can to keep her safe.”

The boy’s palm turned upwards as it was clutched between two of size larger, before they were separated to reveal the nature of the cool imprint that had been left tucked in-between. “This is… How come…?”

“I’m glad. From your expression it should be familiar.” That may be so, but the last time he had seen it was in his father’s hands and that itself had happened quite some time ago. When the boy had prodded about its disappearance, his father had told him simply that it had been lost. “It’s something that was brought from the rubble alongside you.”

*Don’t call it rubble!* The boy wanted to say, but what else was more suitable: wreckage, debris, remains; certainly the home he once held dear no longer existed there. “Is this everything?”

“Yes and no: depending on what you mean by everything. For what I’m lacking in solid links to hinge you to your past, I have a few other items to send you on your way.”

“Where am I going?”

“That’s something that even I would like to know…” still, on the papers handed over were embossed the image of a blue-black blaze amidst starry falls and the name: *Ardent Night.*

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Ground to Earth

The night was quiet; the steady burn of midnight oil only interrupted by intermittent ticks of lead’s rhythmic crossings of the papers. It was on such a night that it occurred.

As the doctor sat at his desk so late as he was prone, while his wife slept innocent beside him and all but the owls had long since sound asleep, the earth shook. “Ah-cha-cha!” The lamp nearly fell from its resting place to spill its volatile contents upon the plank-laced floor.

“That could have been quite bad.”

Still leaned over, he turned to the voice and saw her face dancing with amusement. “Ah, you’re awake.”

Getting out from under the sheets and removing her nightgown it was clear she had no intention to stay and rest. “It would be hard enough for anyone to sleep with such a racket going—though maybe you could.” She stopped for only a second to put finger to thought before pulling on a length of leather. “Help me with the clasps will you.”

“Is it really necessary?” That being said his fingers certainly did not slow in fulfilling their command.

“Old habits die hard.” From the wall she pulled a glowering hatchet and brought it to her shoulder.

“Sometimes I really wish they would.”

“Would you have fallen for me if I weren’t?” Both shared knowing chuckles as they stepped out the doorway and into their backyard they were greeted by looming silver. “So, where are we headed?”

“Based on the sound and tremor I would say neither short nor far.” Beneath orange light an etching of a map could be seen faintly. “We’ll have to go into the forest though…I hope the wilds weren’t aggravated much.”

“Stay behind me.” Maybe they were lines better suited from the other, but both of them took such an exchange as for granted.

Moving forward through the brush they met neither nibbling critters nor fiercer beasts; even the stinging swarms seemed kept at bay. The biggest danger in fact lay in knotted roots and twisted brambles still hidden from the slivering shafts of moonlight that peeked in through the laden canopy above.

Progress was slow, cutting and hacking with careful steps, but soon enough their eyes caught sight of an opening where the light shone brighter than anywhere else. Blessed by wider sight their pace quickened—and it would have continued so had they not stumbled upon a sudden, silent edge bordering the mossy crater.

“Got ya—” While the former managed to keep her balance, the latter stumbled on beside, tipping at a precarious angle before she stopped him with a violent tug. “Hell’d be damned…”

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Waking Sensation

It was empty; it had nothing.

When was it that it started? How could it know, not even being able to tell which came before? The noise buzzed constantly, incessantly; never a lasting moment’s peace.

More noises it did not understand; that may have had no meaning. Where did they come from and why did they hurt so dearly? It did not want this, but they were all it knew and for it they were everything.

*But does it not tire you being all alone, not understanding anything.*

More noise…this time somehow lighter.

*There is more to the world—much more. Right now you are but a frog in the well—not even. You are a frog that does not know the well exists. There are things—many, many thing—that you have to see through your own eyes…through your own lens. See them, taste them, smell them, feel them…and listen close; for everything you take in is a paint by which you draw your picture of the world around you.*

*…*

*You’re so stubborn—the both of you. You hardly leave me any choice. This is the last little prod I can give before I head to sleep…not that you are likely to remember, although If there is anything that stays through it should be this: you are you and you are the only you.*

A new sensation, a new sense of warmth ebbed and flowed, cutting a defining line amidst the empty black. The noises only grew louder, but now it felt it. There was something else, something more. And so for the very first time it awoke in truth…

Dry Tears

*It burns…* Hezran woke slick from saline secretion, his body fevered with uncomfortable chill sticking to his pores. Feebly, he pushed his arms upwards, but snaking strips of leather hugged tight his limbs. As an unbearable itch spread across his skin the press of smooth, cold steel that lay beneath brought little of relief.

*Chink…* As if a dropping glass, a single sound rang against dim orange light and froze his breath in place. Stretching his vision to the whites of his eyes, he saw neither body nor soul and yet amidst those wary wanderings ominous echoes of an off-kilter sort of humming slithered past his ears.

Following the broken notes until his neck strained of bloated vessels pushing against their earthly bonds he saw some shelves. These shelves were piled high—so high that barely a glimpse of tail could have peeked out between. Scanning row on row, he searched for a more substantial crack, but instead crossed so many sights of fleshly slop to ring reminiscent of bloated horrors—along with one particularly laden jar…within which a roundish ball of white, reddish roots anchored to its side, swiveled slight to meet his gaze.

…It was at that moment the hums came to naught. As if some nighting demon had sensed his waking plight, approaching footsteps only served to further shadow fearful minds. A bony hand wrapped around the shelving’s side, clacking palely against stained wood; to be followed short a severed head peeking out beyond.

“…are…feeling…alright…” So quiet were the fearful mumbles that there conveyance seemed opposed to meaning, behind that trembling half-smile framed by glassy eyes and greying scruff.

As thick rimmed circles grew white from perspiration Hezran felt need to scream…which, to his surprise, was returned with a sharper shriek.

“Ow, ow, ow!” Completely unprotected, he felt the full brunt of the noise claw inwards to his brain. Not for lack of breath, the piercing endured beyond an owl’s screech, to continue on inside for moments after; enough that by time he next looked back the disembodied head had sunk deep within its hollow.

*Really now...* Seconds before he would have hardly believed it, but now… “Ishould be the one that’s terrified.” Chained as he was he could hardly chase pursuit.

Just as he thought there nothing for it, a heaving portion of nearby wall burst forth lending a new form of temporary blindness. “Dear, I’m back! We’re really going to need to do something about this door. Damn thing’s jammed again.”

Between brief glimpses Hezran gradually made out a woman’s form, towering well above the smaller cloak that entered in besides her. Of greater shock perhaps was the second, fuller return of a presence once hidden from his view. “I’m glad! It was…a little—scary, on my own.”

“I can’t imagine; there’s hardly anything inside this place that moves but you.” She laughed without a doubt, but that begged the question…

*Really! What else exactly should I be expecting?* Though a hopeful lack of psychic faculty would bid that question left unanswered. Instead a timid nod guided tender eyes towards his form.

“Ah, so that’s why… You feelin’ chipper, my long-lorn corpse?” With a moment’s transformation, it felt as if he were pinned beneath the basilisk’s stare.

“Depends… What happens if I say yes?” Rustling sleeves left poignant regret at runoff words.

“A real smartass are ya. Well, we know how to change that.” An instant’s stride was all it took, and the hands they carried seemed more than happy to sit and pinch him red, but…

“Now honey, I think that’s enough.” An unexpected savior; a pair of skinny arms hugged her from behind.

“If you say so, dear.” *Sweet! Too sweet!* Not seconds past she seemed ready enough to kill him over and now…a real crazy pair. “So how’s our patient?”

“Fine…although I suppose anything would seem so compared to what was before: bare battered bones and scraped skin; I’d seen less gruesome corpses.”

“First time seeing a heart beat in that state. It made a mess for sure.”

“If only you didn’t press so much…I still fear what visitors might visit next I dream.” Now that Hezran had a better look dark circles traced visibly beneath those watered eyes. “I’m almost glad you were not there to see the rest.”

“Oh really! I can’t imagine…” Strange, she seemed more than just a little interested though, even begging.

“Before my v-very eyes; not long after you left, I watched—as was my duty of course, as a carer of life… I watched as those skeletal remains mended over: s-shattered marrow crackling to new form and bending inward…b-broken sinew worming round…r-ruptured vessels binding down…the squirming of skin, matching patch with patch; like some undead lich. Hardly hours passed and, though some residue still remains, it would be no stranger as a devil’s miracle, circumventing both of life and death…”

Or maybe what she really relished was expressions. “While I find your explanations wonderful, I fear it leaves our guests discomforted.” Clearly at the end of his rope, at last the poor man was released from his glistened fairy-telling and bent limp with relief.

And it was a good thing to, for his now awakened imagery led Hezran along groundless paths he’d rather never tread. *Although, if there’s residue then…that must mean that there’s something left? More importantly…*“It’s been quite hard to follow from down here. Would you—“

“Anise.” She cut him off mid-sentence with clear displeasure showing on her face. “My husband who, in all patience and mercy, willed to look over your mortem state is Darren. I hope you’ll remember.”

“Then Darren and Anise. As a grateful *patient* I’d much appreciate that you unbind me, preferably sooner than later. As you can no doubt imagine tightened leather can be rather uncomfortable and, it might just be my imagination, but my feet and hands are beginning to feel especially cold; in fact I’m not quite sure that I can feel them anymore at all…”

“True enough, those are some amazing markings you’ve got there.” Hezran couldn’t see them for himself but he imagined they were quite black by now.

“T-there wasn’t much to work with at the time.”

“I’m flattered that you care, but was this really something that needed so much brooding. I’m just one man, though one that’s starting to feel a bit ratty.”

“Well we can’t have that, you look more than feral enough as is.” *Meaning?* As far as he knew he was not particularly scowling and, besides a small nick he had from his student days, his face could hardly be called intimidating.

“P-perhaps we’d best let him see.” Fortunately, as Hezran’s plight grew bleaker Darren seemed inclined to stand in his defense.

“…If you’re certain.” A moment of incredulity passed before, rubbing the furrows between her eyes, Anise took step to go outside.

Returning shortly after, a bucket sloshing barely over between her guiding hands, Anise plunked the heavy burden on the ground before and, with a wary sort of precision, began uncoiling Hezran’s bonds until all but half remained undone.

The warmth a flowing blood restored, Hezran tested his still numb limbs. Although at first a bit unsure, slipping on elbows more than once, he found enough of the rigidness had abated to allow a slightly slanted sit such that he could turn his head towards the ground.

A wry smile. Looking down amidst the melancholic ripples stared back the face he knew so well. That in itself, along with the few spare inches of neck of neck that showed, was cause to breathe relief.

*There must be something more.* The mirror itself, small and poor, lay lengths beyond his reach. Only through bare nudging, toe by toe, did gradually a fuller picture came into view. “…Well, that’s certainly cause for concern.” Indeed, it would be hard to describe that as human. From short below his neck bloodied patches of bestial furs spotted along his chest and stomach intermittently—that in itself would have been strange enough. “Are you sure you haven’t let your experiments run a touch wild, doctor.”

There was no laughter.

*This is going to make it hard to eat.* A clean incision; that is what should have been, and yet somehow both his arms remained whole. Once fair-skinned reflections, the right now played a black beast’s claw, sleek red branching further along the fore to nip away at the turning joint. *Ironic isn’t it: truly befitting a beast snapping at its master’s heels; though I suppose it serves that purpose only better…* “It’s really something…”

Anise let out a sigh. “To be fair my hubby has penchant t to come across strange things. It’s just you gave us a near scare, lunging out like that, and even if that were all…” It must have happened before, when he was *unconscious*, though even without their actions would hardly be surprising.

“Speaking of which, was there anything else. Though the clothes c-c-can’t be helped, I should have at least had a few other things on me.” Now that Hezran had cooled down a bit the frayed threads that remained covering his lower half were insufficient warmth to keep his teeth from chattering.

Thankfully his benefactors were kind enough toss of spare blanket Hezran’s way, which he accepted gratefully for the insulation, along with itch and musty smell, it provided. “I don’t know—rather at the time it didn’t cross our minds to look for anything else. It would have been crazy enough with just one of you alive.”

“Sorry…?” Following Anise’s pointing thumb Hezran remembered that she had not come in alone. He had thought he had been the only one who had fallen on that night… *Looks like a child, might not even come up to reach my chest.* He thought, but then he remembered that voice’s words. *So it wasn’t just a dream!!*

“Looks like you’ve remembered.”

“Sorry… My mind took more jostling than I’d thought.” More than remembering, he had just finally managed to connect the dots, though it was better if they didn’t notice.

“You’re lucky enough it didn’t fall completely out.” With a snort Anise gave the hooded figure a light tap that sent shorter legs shuffling over to his side.

For more than a moment the two faced each other in silence. Although Hezran could not see beneath the shrouded hood he thought he sensed a glimmer of glower from within.

*Uh…* At this rate things were going nowhere, and the longer it took the more suspicious it would seem.

*Then…* Excused in his mind, though he would be lying if he said he wasn’t interested, Hezran brought his human hand to the fore. The hood swished back softly through the air to reveal…

“You’re making quite the face?” Anise voiced a touch of concern, but Hezran heard nothing of it.

A pair of mismatched eyes looked hollow into his: one preserving golden-amber glare and another murky cloud laced with moonlight yet unwavering. Crimson lengths of hair gave way to tufts black and white and from beneath, a single, crooked horn peeked obsidian through the blood-smeared sea; severed abrupt before a point.

*Curses follow…!* Even now they came to mock him: a constant reminder of a once fragile, now shattered peace.

“Wh—?! Stop!!” Just as he had taken hold suddenly he found his freedom bound by another crushing grip; not a moment sooner before he took actions he would truly have regretted.

Blood gushed from his lip. The sudden flash of pain soothed his mind, heralding him back from inner darkness. *They’re dead. She’s gone. There is nothing that will bring her back.* A repeated circling of thoughts, then deep breaths: first one, then two.

When next he opened his eyes they were clear of haze. The girl before him was not her, no matter how similar to the paintings of his memories—it should have been obvious but loss and longing had riddled far too many holes about his mind. *Pathetic…*

“Anise…” Darren was the first to notice.

There were tears. Ripples appeared in the bucket. But they were not his own.

His eyes were dry. How long had it been since he was able to cry? Not on the anniversary of his familyès stealing dusk, nor through any of the many toiling days do follow where he soaked his hands in mud; not even when faced with the mutilated decay of that which he treasured above all else… His eyes had always remained dry.

*Always far too late and now should have remained no different.*

His house had already crumbled. He was alone sinking in the poisoned marshes of an ill-wrought future. Chin-deep in the mud, so thick that no amount of holy droplets could hope dilute…

But now she was crying for him. Her eyes once stiller than the clearest moonlit surface now echoed ripples of their own as if she could feel every inch of sadness as her own and let hers out when he could not let his own. Even if that stolid face would claim not to understand, its silent weeping still meant more than anything to him and before he realized he had brought his hand to wipe the droplets as they flowed.

A sharp tap to the head brought Hezran back from the deep, where he realized his restraints, both flesh and bound, had been released. “Don’t you have something to say?”

Were these really the same eyes: those same ones that seemed so dark and dank just moments before. Could he still bring himself to detest the owner of such a fragile pair of eyes…

“I’m here for you.” *After all that’s what I promised.* The words were taken from him before the thought. And, though it might take some getting used to, at least they didn’t feel wrong.

“I’m glad you’ve made up. Certainly no beasts I ever met made such convincing streams of sorrow; would even move more hardened eyes than mine.” It was an understandable misunderstanding, but not altogether untrue; Anise’s expression felt much softer for it. “Friends should be cherished. Even more so if your family.”

“I will.”

“It’s a good answer. And now that that’s that, I think it’s about time I got to work on sewing another.”

*Sewing…* An inquisitive tilt of head was all the speaking needed.

“We can’t very well have you walking around like that, now can we.”

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Forbidden Fruit

It was the perfect day for a nap, birds and hoppers singing nimbly in the breeze. Against that sunlit backdrop the blades of grass that brushed ever so lightly seemed as a heavenly bed of hay to snore the day away; the rhythmic clacking of iron swift through wood only lulling a stauncher drowse over the calming scenery.

*Clunck…* Amidst a daze the descending axe plunged deep within the earth, just inches beside a slumbered foot. Sequence broken Hezran rubbed a touch of drool from his lip as the other hand went to clear his eyes where a small prick’s blossom purged away the last remains of sleep. *Ouch…* It was not deep, just enough to bubble silent at the surface and still not fade away.

*Another peaceful day…* Completely unlike those of that floating rock from whence he came: with its crowded towers and thinning streets. Just land…land as far as the eye could see. At times like this it was easy enough to forget his rugged transformation…even things that came before.

Anise and Darren had offered him and the girl a place to stay. Of course, while they were there, he had to do his part to earn their keep, but menial labour was a welcome retreat from previous occupation. Spare time allowing, he had even been able to take up the hunt—such that kept his mind on the more pleasant days of watching his father long ago when it steered him to the past—and the Ardent knew a spare rump of meat was always welcome at the table. More than that the pastime served to re-accustom him to the features and creatures of the land, that until recently had been rendered little more than the subject of textbook fantasy.

A mellow yawn escaped his mouth as stared up to the blinding light. *Still, it’s surprising…* No matter how far he searched, he only saw bounds of endless blue traversed by fluffy whites. No sign of that ominous, black moon traced the sky.

From a basket laid out to the side he took a fresh fruit plucked straight from its bearings not hours before. His teeth tore the skin and with a subtle crunch sweetness spread across is tongue. *It really is…*bliss, an atmosphere free from strife or war; the constant battle and contradiction that used to be his daily life. If only it were not all a lie…

The cabin’s door creaked from behind. “You’ve made some good progress there. At this rate we’ll have more than enough firewood for the coming winter.” Darren had become much more comfortable around Hezran in the recent days, the tremble and twitch in his voice all but completely evaporated.

“Sorry, about that. I must have got lost in thought.” Looking now, Hezran saw that quite a pile had formed to his side; hopefully not all would go to waste.

“Never mind that, are you sure there aren’t other places you need to be?” At times Darren might be mistaken for reading minds, though the truth he hinted at probably laid significantly closer home than the farthest of Hezran’s musings.

“They’ve gone into town haven’t they?” As soon as Anise had finished his robe, an uninspiring yet practical dirty brown: similar to the girl’s own, though a little more straight and a little less shaped as doting might inspire; Hezran had taken it upon himself to scout the area for threats. But for all his worry the search had come up plain. No signs of frantic pursuers or subversive espionage, just simple village life; or rather the worst of it were distrustful gazes sparked by Hezran’s curious coverings—he could only imagine what of those would come for sight of his true appearance.

“There were a few things we needed after all; always is. …But, are you sure this is alright?”

“…”

“At this rate Anise is going to have trouble letting go. We’ve been having a hard enough time as it is trying to have a child of our own.”

“…” Hezran knew Darren was right. Hezran saw the way Anise looked at the girl, loving and caring in the only way a child would hope their mother would—in a way he wished he could. He had watched as slowly but surely those efforts had begun bearing fruit: albeit in only the quaintest of expression. Yet those expressions were true enough that at times Hezran wished he could just continue on forever, watching lukewarm on; at one point leaving her to live a life of peace while he went chasing his solitary fire. *…But it won’t be so easy to break this promise. This world’s not nearly kind enough to let us.*

“Darren!” An unexpected sight: a panicked Anise flew into her husband’s arms barring further questions.

“What is it?” A rare moment of strength: stroking calm to a tender head on verge of incongruous tears.

“She’s missing—I lost her in the crowd.”

“Ah, right, it’s around that time isn’t it?”

“Time?” Hezran perked his ears.

“The Harvests’ End festival—it’s held every year a few months before we head into winter. Quite a few of the local village’s band together around this time so it gets pretty busy, to say the least.”

*That could be dangerous.* More people meant more chances of discovery, and of revealing to whatever sinister intents might be mixed within. “I’m going!” Dropping the blade in return for cloak, Hezran quickly donned himself for running.

“We’ll come with you!” Anise, distraught, tried to offer their assistance, but he would have nothing of it.

“Please…what if she comes back?” Hezran had a nagging feeling: one of darkness. It wouldn’t be right of him to have these kind souls bear witness what might occur.

“Calm, Anise. Let’s leave him to it. You know better than anyone that if anyway can find the girl, it’s him.” This wouldn’t have been the first occurrence, and likely it would not be the last; but, true to his word, every time they would come back hand in hand.

“Thank you.” Ignoring the indignant pout out of the corner of his eye, Hezran turned his heel hoping he would be able to requite their trust…hoping that he would make it in time—in time to prevent that ethereal darkness from rearing forth its ugly head.

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Devil Face

The infernal clamour of a sunstroked eve guided swarms of spectators through a sea of stands stuffed between their waves of sweat-filled joy and the walls of equally bustling plastered buildings. Amidst that crowded berths one small, fragile soul pushed mindlessly towards the fringe; sometimes slipping, sometimes bumping through the crowd; yielding both slurish provocation and merried helping hands. The owner of that fragile soul itself heard little, as if but airy bubbling mouthed silently beneath the surface of an uproarious, silent ocean. In fact, even her own inner voice was far from reaching beneath the tumultuous thunderclouds usurping what little greenery had cultivated inside her mind.

Before she knew of where or what, she had reached a tiny corner at the end of a deserted, dusty alley. Crouching on her knees in wait of the storm to pass, she clawed fervently at the ground as if to provide what little satiation she could to keep the invading foreign lust from bursting past the seams. It was something that had repeated time and time again, as with the ebb and flow of the ocean’s waves: at one point her and at the next she was not sure. For every moment of peace she had it seemed thousands of shattered memories were pressed deep into her soul, corrupting her very being. At first she hardly cared, but more and more a new feeling came into play—a feeling of resistance…a feeling that she did not want to lose herself. Growling softly, chewing sharply at her own blood and flesh—it was all she could do to keep the Darkness at bay; her own noises, both without and within, so deafening that she missed the signs of their approach.

“—weird…never speaks…what’s with her—“ So close and directed it was no surprise that some notes edged through the static and that they only seemed to speak the worst—sticking small, hurtful needles to a brain already wracked full of barbs.

“—you…listening?” She wished they would stop. She wished they would just go away.

“—her face…clothes…ugly…scars…what’s underneath?” Small patches of heated cold blossomed to the surface. She did not understand much, but she knew her difference and she knew their words were cruel before innocent. Under normal circumstances a few calming words would have been enough to help her stay but now there were no such words on offer; and even then That welling up from within would not have listened.

“—monster—” And with that instance it felt like something had snapped, flooded but strangely clear…

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Bloodied

He was too late. By the time Hezran reached her side things had already begun unravelling. Standing there blood-soaked and with smile, dripping claws dressed by dangling flesh as white lines ran through the blotches on her face, he felt it yet again.

He knew better than anyone that he should have been watching—guarding. He had felt the welling contradiction burgeoning up within, ebbing and flowing with the passing of each tide…and still he had left her to face it all alone. He had been so caught up in his own feelings: his own rage and his regret; that he had failed to see her for what she truly was—a child. A child thrust into this world empty and all alone; yet burdened more than any other.

Though her body remained strong and her face remained still her eyes trembled visibly in their sockets…as if seeing was all that was allowed of her. From their first meeting he had known—he could see how desperate hands pulled her to sway. Teetering, tottering—she was like a leaning top threading a single line of white; and though a guiding light may serve its way, that was only if she did not stray.

She needed someone… Someone to prop her up when she fell away… Someone who knew the darkness’ ways and could bring her back when she had come astray… Hardly anyone knew the darkness better than him, as someone who frantically clawed his way back time and time again. And so…

As the claw pierced deep into his hand he gripped all the tighter. “I’m here for you.” Once again he said the words—a promise both for her and for himself. “No matter what disaster comes, no matter how far you wander in the fray. I’ll always take your hand and pull you back; whoever or whatever might turn against us.” Whether or not they reached her at last the tension drained from those fragile, fighting arms, leaving only the most minor of petulant resistance as he dabbed her face with drier cloth.

“I suppose this will have to do.” Despite staunchest efforts blood was, and always will be, a stubborn thing. Though a calming pale had slowly begun return to her cheeks the liquids rosiness refused to be completely denied; though now both cloaks shared deeper stain of richened, reddened earth.

“Raise your arms for me, will you.” So he said, but on second thought would she even understand.

In response, though accompanied by an unsure nibbling at the jaw, the girl sluggishly brought both arms to bear.

*She’s been learning well…* It was at least something to be glad for. “This might be uncomfortable…but at least bear it until we get out of town.” Slipping the weighted leather off her back he quickly brought it inside out before clothing her once again. It was fortunate that the cloth was both dark and thick, enough to hide the stains from view.

“Don’t make that face… See I’m doing it too.” Definitely more than just a little icky, but the bigger question was exactly how they were going to explain their state when they found their way on back.

“Hmm…” Watching her kneel down it took only a second to realize the true cause of her distress. *I’ve grown pretty callous haven’t I?* During the entire episode he had never spared a second glance to their surroundings—the collateral. The neglect was little to be proud of and Hezran did think it made him worse a person despite the necessary shielding it had provided over time. *I suppose I’ll have to learn all over again—who better to teach me.*

He used his knees as anchors to keep him from succumbing to the battering waves. To each fragile body he put a finger, measuring their pulse. *No good… This one maybe…a little bandage. What about the rest?*

In the end at least one had passed; most of the others still in for a fight. The bandages were makeshift at best: the last torn scraps of his battered, blasted uniform all used up; still better than nothing to staunch the flow. It was still a nasty sight…better than it looked if you counted a brutally twisted massacre of sorts. But it wasn’t a sight to stay and be found.

“Come on.” That is what he said, though looking in those dull, blurred eyes, the action itself would not be so easy. Hezran felt something nudge against his leg. *Ah…* Those words he had said, it seemed she had taken them to their literal intent. *Well, that’s fine too.* A shattered heart on the verge of breaking, he could hardly blame her. If anything it made him think; he desperately wanted to do something—anything to patch that crumbling heart. An idea came to mind. “…Maybe… Follow me.” He grasped her hand.

Taking their leave from the alley and wandering through the crowds more than a strange look or two passed their way, but with everyone so caught up in festivities a second glance was hardly spared. Even the putrid stench of iron was cloaked by dust and savour.

Reaching the central street, by now a reddish-orange glow had begun its cower down the bright-lined horizon with the majority of crowd having sifted over towards the large hill just skirting the timbered walls for final drinks leaving, only the few most spirted laggards left behind in search of food, play, or other night pursuits. Like the two dull, twinkling early stars shadowed far above they stood together with spaces all around.

“Let’s have a look around.” Leading her purposefully, gradually along the waning street Hezran saw most of all the stands had closed. Still, there should be one or two things that would catch a young girl’s eyes.

Shortly thereafter he felt the makings of a tug. *That was quicker than I thought…* It should have been difficult to tell, with her hood up to cover her eccentricities, and yet somehow he could tell exactly where her intent would lie.

“Sorry I’m closing up for the night—” Certainly the man had all but cleaned up his station with only a few loose ends left to gather, but… “Aren’t you bleeding!?” …it looked like a few trailing droplets had leaked beneath the patching.

“Ah, that is…I cut myself earlier—part of the reason we were so late.” Hezran raised his hand to show his bandages.

“Are you sure you’re all right? Shouldn’t you have it looked at?”

“No problem. It’s already been patched up; I hardly feel it.” Flexing his palm Hezran made a show of feigning strength: faking failing to cover for a pained wince and all; the truth being that the clawed marks beneath had long since had vanished. “Plus I couldn’t very well disappoint her here could I.” Hezran clamped his hand lightly to Reivyn’s shoulder.

“All right, all right, just stop moving it like that.” With a sigh the man brought back a few rings from his boxes, before begging to rummage through the rest.

“Ah, that’s alright. What we’re aiming for is already up.”

The man looked clueless a second as he followed Hezran’s point. “Really, if it’s just that I could give it to you. Actually I’ve been looking to get rid of it.”

“Is there a reason?”

“Not really, I mean it’s kind of shabby and a bit cracked. It’s been a good year for us farmer’s and my wife’s perfectly satisfied with the new ones she got…though it’s been in my family for generations.” A touch of lingering fondness could be heard in his voice.

“Have you thought about fixing it up?”

“I have, but I haven’t been able to find anyone who trades the wood it’s made of. It just didn’t feel right to use anything else.”

Admittedly it had an unusual sheen, different from the artificial ones Hezran had seen back home, anyways… “It wouldn’t be any good if we didn’t play for it. If you’re going to give it up, it should be fair and square.” Part of this for the experience after all. It would be a good for her, engaging as any true child would.

“If you’re sure? How about it, I’ll give you two throws? If one of you gets it on the post it’s a win.” Two tosses worth of rings were put on the counter.

“Sounds good, but don’t we have to pay…?”

“Let’s just say the Ardent brought us together and call it that. After all, don’t these rings look kind of similar?” It was part of the religion of this land, the symbol of a simple knot comprised of entangled threads, and one of the few things that Hezran saw in common with the sky. Even the currency, Knots as they were called, was similarly modelled and, as Darren would tell it, the appeal all stemmed from ancient stories of the past: a pristine world reshaped by falling rock; mere fantasies brought to life; a legendary bond formed to stave off cataclysm.

There were certainly links: The things they said with whimsy down here were chased with a fervorous belief—pursued with every fibre of their beings—enough to make certain dreams reality. How could he laugh now…?

“Then we’ll take you up on that.” Taking the rings he put one in the girl’s hand while keeping the second for himself. That being said his stagnant memories of childhood were hardly enough to go by, and if that is how he was then she was likely worse.

“Hmm, you weren’t kidding there. Here I’ll show you.” The owner graciously stepped on beyond the makeshift gate to demonstrate. “The trick is in the wrist; keep it level but with enough force just to come on over… See like that.” Hezran doubted it would be quite so easy to replicate.

“So close.” Before he knew it the girl had already copied the motion, though whether because the difference in muscles or technique the toss fell just short of ringing, instead catching a tiny nick in the post where it wavered on the verge of falling. “Look like I’ll need to replace it for next time.” The girl’s lips turned slightly down.

*Now, how to go about it…* He had some confidence in his aim and after being shown the trick it dawned on him the similarities to some of the unusual weapons he had been dragged to train with in the past, but there was more point than simply winning. Taking the ring in his hands he aimed slightly lower.

“Bud, are you sure you watched carefully?”

Oh, he had watched carefully enough. Letting loose he knew full well there was no way his throw was going to score itself, but that was not a problem.

“…I’ll be damned.”

“No good?”

“Nope. It’s good enough. You win, fair and square.” While Hezran’s ringlet fell limp to the side, the first was jarred free of its trappings, just enough to sink the goal. It had been a bit of a risk, but well…*let’s just say it was worth it.* “Here you go.”

The proprietor brought their prize down from the shelf: a small wooden comb so light in shade as to appear translucent; Hezran rubbed the soothing grain briefly before passing it on to the girl’s waiting hand. “Thank you. She’ll treasure it.”

“No, thank you. It was a sight worth seeing.” It seemed like a weight lifted; not just for them, but for the man as well. “Are you sure you don’t want to stop for a drink to commemorate the occasion.” The man held up a small bottle of pungent liquid.

“As much as I appreciate your offer, I think we should get going. There’ll be hell waiting if we stay here,” *in more ways than one.*

“That’s too bad. I’ll have to enjoy it most for the both of us.” The remaining fire of the setting sun reflected brilliantly among a sky now twinkling full force within the still, clear surface of a cup. *It’s going to be a perfect night for gazing at the stars…*no matter where he was the sky was the one thing that never changed.

With something to look forward to in light of the trials yet to come, Hezran turned away only to catch an unusual sight. “Is something wrong?” Those upon the hilltop, once calm and silent, had all at once begun a spirited sprint fleeing blindly in all directions…all but one.

The surface of the drinking cup wavered ominously and before long thunderous footsteps could be heard yet still unseen. “It just had to happen tonight of all nights! I wonder what set it off.” The man seemed to know something of the cause.

“What is *it*?”

“You don’t know!” From the looks of it he should. “No, I guess you must have been pretty lucky your whole life. Anyways it doesn’t matter. All you need to know is that it’s bad and to keep as far away as possible. Just make a run for it. Don’t look back and get as far away as you can… Hopefully the damage won’t be too bad this time.” The man put his words to practice, dropping all but his most precious valuables such that would not way him down.

“Let’s go.” *Don’t know what’s going on but I’ll take his word for it.* Hezran planted his feet in preparation only to see the girl stuck in place. “What is it now—” Then Hezran noticed. The girl’s murky eye which always seemed to lag behind stared straight as if locked on to something it saw far beyond the earthy lump. “Of all the times…”

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Impatience

There was something in the air. Birds were scattering to the air and foxes dug into their holes paying no mind to the others chasing after them.

“I’m going to look for them,” *and don’t even dare try to stop me!* Even from the cabin they could hear the poundings and shatterings of the earth—and it terrified her.

“It will be fine.” What terrified him more was that she would rather run to rescue only to be flattened, yet even Darren’s worries would no longer do to keep Anise. That she still had the bluster after all this was something that he had only come to expect.

However, that bluster only lasted a second longer before she tripped over her own feet to the ground with waning eyes. “You…!”

“I’m sorry.” Darren knew it was something unforgivable. Even for him that he would have to slip the powder to his own wife was something that gnawed his conscious. But he would have the patient’s patience, no matter what the cost.

*Well, it should be fine.*

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Meat

The smell was tantalizing—as it had never been before. Usually in preference the smell of the calming woodlands, the crunch of a chomp of healthy greens; now the other more maddening scent lit up its nostrils like the draw of noxious fumes.

It had been drawn out of the forest for a particular piece that caused salivates at its gums. In its mind it knew that there was nothing good to come of it. But its minds had been growing smaller as of late long whiles, the places left for thought constantly scrunched as other vengeful and more spiteful mists spread their roots within its already bloated head. The gas that had confined the remainder of its inklings hungered for more—another’s spread and joining—and the other less simple minds’ hatreds were more than happy to oblige.

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Unfrozen World

*Why did it have to come to this?* Hezran gritted his teeth between rapid, frantic breaths, every screaming scrap of muscle and straining iota of concentration focused on his next foot forward—his next step away from that lumbering mass that shadowed so closely behind.

*Travelling into the wilderness it’s not the beasts you need fear. There are t-things…things far more terrifying—*nothing accentuated a friendly warning like the fear of a giant’s trampling accompanied by yet more thunderous roars that tinged of agony. Swept with the wind through a rain of prismatic autumn leaves no thought spared to graze the euphoric sights.

It seemed only moments before the turmoil of understanding, a mutual crime died both with blood; a drenched smile pulled from beneath the murk and then—not shortly after the final scatterings of fumes from the festival’s last remaining embers—did *it* come into view, the once packed earthen mound seeming little more than a cracking pebble beneath its tread.

Even at such distance its first screams stained oozing signs of death as docile nature proved of fragile standing, those few critters still gall enough to frighten soon petrified beneath its yellowed, bulbous gaze. It was terrifying in all forms: greenish-yellow reptilian skin, engorging sacks of infectious pus, tremendous tusks of skewering; but most of all in the decidedly human gate that betrayed the satanic froth spilling freely from its crooked mouth for which there was to be no reasoning. Even so some frightening sense of purpose held strong over the towering insanity—for the creature’s wavering swings of sight soon found their mark.

He had no way of knowing exactly what it is she saw—what she was still seeing, but Hezran…in that moment Hezran knew for certain: simply waiting would only serve renew his hollowness. A desperate plight, he called out to the quivering soul frozen to his side—his newly found, more strongly cherished other half…alas had she long sunk far beneath the depths.

Each shaking of earth, each pulsing pooling of red spreading ever closer; it was only a matter of moments. Her hand had never seemed smaller in his grasp.

An inch away—that was all that was left as he grasped her waist, twisting his body oddly to the side as to secure a few more mere beating breaths away from splatter. Rolling once, then twice he dug both tearing nail and fiercer claw deep into the stinging earth for steady. On two feet once more he turned to a scene of silenced whimpers and blackened rubble, disaster having already returned full circle.

There could be no doubt.

There was no way he could outrun it, especially not with extra weight strapped across his back—he knew it. No matter, even as the tumultuous wall of air pushed heavily from behind; even as it threatening to strip his feet from ground—he gripped and he ran.

There was no way he would concede. He was tired of making concessions. It may have been the safe path—the right path—but he did not want to be left behind all alone, not anymore. Whether it was a single gun or an entire nation, he had already decided…no more! Not once more would he watch idly as everything eroded away. Anything and everything he had and could have had, he would spend on the next step forward…and Ardent be damned if he were to let one single monster take it all away.

And so now panting and verging with death, he sped from tree to tree every nerve alight and ready. Sparked by naïve thought he had leapt from town to forest hoping to lose its nose within the thick and tangling undergrowth. He should have known…

Pulsating, thickened limbs struck wood like drums, blasting them to splinters. As if nature’s barricades were mere fragile toothpicks *it* followed on completely unperturbed; not a blade of grass left spared in its pounding wake.

It would not be long now…it was getting closer. His lungs dried up of air. He felt both the creeping tendrils of despair, and the pull of longing peace as he had forever been denied. And perhaps in this strange influence it was that he felt stranger connection; a…similarity. He and it: they weren’t all that different. Two impurities—remnants left behind to stain a not so pure world. While it submitted to destructive impulse, he endured the price of stagnant sanity. *Bearing through the pain is half the fun…reaching the other side is pure bliss.* Still, as things were going, he would be forced to bear it all at once and people fell to frailer blows. He had to find a way to worm out.

*Ah…* A glimmer; something displaced from earthen browns and greyish barks. Amidst a bed of colours it stood sharply. At that moment he felt his burden lightening; it seemed she had come back. In a moment his eyes met hers and he knew what he needed to do.

Lowering her down their fingers touched light and fleetingly as they separated both reluctant and resolved. It was all the encouragement he needed.

As she rushed off in the distance he moved to grasp the sparkle from its nest. Grasping the hilt with his hand, he tugged with all his might. Little shavings gave way to weight, bit by bit, until the metal’s bond loosened springing the object from its resting place.

“I’ve missed you.” Spinning once then twice, the dagger’s edge glimmered welcomingly before sliding comfortably into his palm. Rusty-red drew a perfect arc along the miraculously unchipped blade, a feeling of new and yet familiar aura spreading from the tip.

“Graarrggghh…!” Not a moment more to spare reunion Hezran grasped the nearby trunk, clambering up the tree’s highest reaches. The branches creaked knowingly as he waited for the earmarked head’s approach. There was only one chance.

Breathing deep he closed his eyes, counting the seconds. The instant before the behemoth rushed on by, he dropped. Falling through the air he plunged straight towards its shoulder. Dodging the passing impalement he sunk his claw, piercing deep into the sickening flesh.

*Spurt…spurt…* Several pouches burst, spraying liquid revulsion indiscriminately through the air. Ignoring the tepid stench sticking warmly to his skin, Hezran pulled close to sink his second knife.

This time it was different. That deathless beast that ran endlessly through piercing stakes and cutting waste echoed a truly fearful dying scream, rattling numbly through Hezran’s skull. For the first time it slowed. Shaking violently amongst the trees it made every effort to dislocate the lethal parasite clinging nimbly to its soul.

Over and over Hezran coughed up red as he was brought to bear, a dizzy blackness preying on his consciousness. As he felt himself gradually slip of life, so did his grip loosen of what remained, and he was forced to watch the fleshy folds close in his last remaining hope.

*Is this…how it’s going to end?* A single fragile fang that cut so deep, only to end up meaning nothing. *Huh… Why?! Why stop there? …Is that it?* A silent reminder; a defiant berating—he had hardly thought she was capable; but he had been known to be weak to such gestures in the past.

A rippling reflection ran through his stronger mind—it was not yet his time to give. He did not know what he could do, but doing everything he could was everything. *Even if I can’t cut through a hopeless future; I at least want to sever my hopeless self!*

Lifting his crooked arm once more, he sliced down straight down focusing all his energy on that final speck of light that pulsated dully beneath layers of squirming fleshy sinew and hardened bone, and in that moment…

A final knell; the foliage shook as birds went scattering to the skies. Spurred by the sudden stop Hezran flew through the air despite his gripping, stopped only in the end by a solid bed of surfaced roots.

“Kuh…!” Whatever breath was left knocked painfully from his lungs, Hezran was only thankful to finally be at rest. But…*what was that?* Thinking back, within that moment, he had felt a vibration, almost as if in sync with his intent, and then some small unnatural void displaced his sight…one not entirely dissimilar to that which had swallowed him whole before; however, looking at his weapon now there was no hint of anything such.

Within his daze he noticed footsteps and looking up he saw the girl, an angel in the dark, holding out her hand framed by peculiar silence and a snowstorm of petalled white powder dancing in the breeze, shimmering as if absorbed of branching starlight. Like a starlit raven…*Reivyn*.

Raising his hand once more he saw his cuts and bruises; broken bones and bleeding holes made clean, their leavings only sign in the sharpened gnaw crawling up his beastly arm. He could hear another voice in his head, a caring voice, which stumbled over new-learned words. *I’m not q-quite sure h-how to say this… I don’t know how long you have left. I-If things continue…* But all he did was smile grasping the hand that lent him.

For a moment they stood in silent wonder; a lifeless moment passed them by. When next they separated she held a stone: the very gem that he had slipped out from within, a brightly metallic greenish-grey; a familiar source of legends; caressed tenderly within her palm. Fire-breathing lizards; miraculously healing angels; mind-controlling demons and countless other stories come to pass.

However, such bedtime tales would have to wait. Stepping from the scattered orchard they made to make return, to what home may or not remain, and as they crossed along the path of shards Hezran looked back to his claw, covered in a recent powder on this snowless day. *If it’s truly as I think…death like this would be that much better.*

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Dusk’s Arrival

“There, there. We’ll have you drinking soon enough.” It had been a frantic rush, even from the next town over. You could image the distress, receiving that tattered message at the night’s first breath. There had been no time to rest and the man was extremely grateful to his steed, streams of vapors from its heated nose a steady contrast to the cooling night’s embrace.

Bringing his horse to a stop by the battered gate, split so wide and scattered as if by a tornado’s gaping maw, he gently brought himself to ground, stroking the noble beast’s muddled mane tenderly as its head dipped towards the shallow trough prepared ahead.

“Lodis—Sir!” From beyond the rubble another man of matching uniform asserted himself in stride.

“Come now, no need to keep formalities, not at a time like this.” An already bitter pill only made more acrid to the tongue.

“But the commander said—”

“Never mind what the commander said. At least let me have some peace at strife. My draw of the lot could really have done with a touch more grace as well.” Beneath muttered breath his subordinate made a brief listing of his crimes: dillydallying, a silver tongue, lack of discipline; all ignored handily by their recipient, except for one comment: “I don’t suppose you would be willing to dress in skirt. That might abate me for a while.”

“Spare me…” The two shared knowing smiles bent of mutual respect. The man, a long-time adjutant, knew full well his duty and his trust. “Are you alone?”

“I sent the others to pick up the trail.” It was not hard to see that whatever left those footsteps was nothing a few mere knights could hope to deal with, even less so without their captain at their head. “Don’t worry, I know better than to tell them to do anything dangerous; and I most certainly would never do anything to aggravate the crown.”

“Heh.” How much was true, the right hand only knew too well. Lodis was a man far too likeable.

“In any case, they are only to check and should be back soon enough. Now, what happened here?” Beneath frivolous speech braced an iron will forged of purpose.

“As you can see, it’s not a pretty thing to look at. Thankfully the Absoltant left before more destruction could spread; most of the infrastructure and more importantly the people were spared the worst. As it is it’s more a matter of time and effort than anything else.”

“It sounds like we got away rather cleaner than expected. Only the Ardent how came we to deem such things holy—”

“No more sir.” Not another word.

“I know, I know… Any idea as to what caused its rampage?”

“None…” A touch of apprehension.

“Really? No one strayed a touch too far for their merrymaking; perhaps accidently took a leak on its foot while mistaking it for a branch. Usually these sorts of things don’t just end up happening on their own.” Anywhere else his words might have been taken as a stroke of blasphemy, but Lodis’s man knew full well his seriousness. “Although I expect from your tone that things are far more troubling than they seem.”

The adjutant’s shock did not even last a second. “There is one thing that seems to be causing some strife and…confusion among the villagers. It doesn’t seem completely related, but…”

“Take me to them.”

“Sir!”

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Diverting Intention

“…All the pieces are set. Well…it’s about time to get to work.”

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A Knight’s Demise

“See here good Sir!” No sooner had Lodis entered the makeshift tent than a bushy beard had pulled him to the side. “My son…not long ago he was all smiles and glitter. I admit he was a tad mischievous, but what are all children they’re age. There’s no way he deserved such scars and that’s not even the worst of it. See those grieving tears! I was luckier than some at least my baby still lives, though painedly.”

Even beneath the bandages it was clear as day. Seeping red encrusted black; lines like a wolf’s claw scratched through bark. Lodis touched his hand upon that fragile forehead burning up even through his fingers’ plated joints. *This isn’t good…at this rate he won’t make it through the night.* “Doctors!”

“What?”

“Aren’t there any doctors! Someone who can make poultice or medicines to keep the heat at bay. Every village should have at least one!” However, only muttered mumbles presented in response; not for lack of knowledge, but some other reason. “Speak up! Is this really the time for apprehension?!”

“There is one such; outside the village not far…but—”

“They’re the ones! They’re the ones was keeping those beasts: the ones that got Johnny, Robb, and Susan!” Sheltered by her mother’s clutching arms an armless gal released the fiercest of glares, burning strong an altogether different kind of fever. “I’ll never forgive them!”

“You heard the child. We haven’t seen ourselves, but she’s not one to lie. Too bad…” Alone amidst fevered pitch surrounding, the man who offered hope clenched his hand tentatively; as if remembering back.

“Even so… At this rate there will only be more loss. What pride is worth not saving a life?” To truth the flames would hardly dim, but few looked down in shame. “You should understand… Doubts only leave regret.”

“He’s right. If no one else will go, I at least will hope…will bow my—” *Head* might have been said not for a moment’s scream of terror, and the object’s severing from its place. Execution stood at the flaps with fragile light balled in its claws leaving only dim descent for shadowed souls…

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Tinder

*This smell…*the smoky scent of oiled tinder flared up Hezran’s nostrils. It was not so fierce as a forest set alit: so little so he doubted his former self would have caught the wisps; and yet it still held strength enough to brand searing images of urgent chaos.

Pressing passed final swaying branches shelter, they were greeted by the ire of a dozen dotted, orange eyes pointed down towards the place of their return. Beneath the angry glow Darren could be seen waving his arms in protest; a vicious mob relentless in descent barely held by the solid steeled arms of an unfamiliar shining knight who gritted none the less.

At Hezran’s side the girl trembled affrightedly, holding clawing hands to a twisted face…and needless ask why, but to hold her tight in his own arms.

*I’d expected it coming, sooner rather than later…but not this soon.* It would not have taken much: whether through the welling over of blind suspicion or the lucid waking of vengeful justice; in the end evil’s mercy was still evil none the less, however*…I can’t say I approve.* Hezran had seen it time and time again, how quickly people were to turn, like rabid animals. Rather than thinking of how many that had been saved—that could still yet be saved—they would sooner feed healing hands to raging maws than vouch for innocence.

“I need you to go in through the back… Can you hear me?” None of his words were reaching her. The sight had reduced her own will’s tug back to its weakest state, a mere fragile pull against the others scrambling in her depths. Without care they would take her back again; string her like a puppet in their ever heartless theatre.

It was all in her head and he could feel it: She was the one who had caused this. Even if it wasn’t her some part of her had agreed to play their game. She could feel the flesh rended by her own hands as new as yesterday. And now those memories were coming back to haunt for those she cared.

“Reivyn!” He called out again, this time with the name he had given her; the name that was only hers. “It’s alright. It’s alright to feel guilt and sorrow… to regret what you’ve done. It’ll only make you stronger for it, but that’s only if you don’t give in; if you don’t let the pain decide your path for you.” Slowly muddled focus returned to view, but it was not enough. “Maybe in the end we are evil and maybe they will call us scum, but at least I think that there is still good we can do, keeping strong of mind. This world is much darker than they realize…so much more; yet they don’t know enough to know it. It might be taking a leaf out of and old friend’s shattered book, by taking this to the end; but one good coming is there’s little more for us to lose. And if at the end of the day the world really wants us gone then that’ll be that, but it would be far too boring to go down silent, not when there is so much left to do. Even if it is impossible to make amends: To cause a change—wouldn’t that be the most interesting?”

Maybe it was his words; his calling of her name, or maybe it was just the thought; the sound of a steady voice keeping her from the edge. He was just glad to see her recovered of her worldly lens, and feel her arms entwine his own.

For a moment, maybe two he let it stay; any longer and the world would not wait. “Now go! Anise should be inside…hopefully she can help somehow.” If she would be willing, but at least Reivyn he knew she would not turn away.

As Reivyn ran towards the cabin she looked back briefly, a clear falter taken occupancy in her eye; not for her but for him. Hezran brushed the air lightly, a carefree smile on his face that yet failed to disguise from her. *I guess this is what happens when two share one life, a Channeler and their Heart.* He was glad. If it would keep her from drenching in the muddiest bits, he would happily lie down to be her bridge.

And so he went. Few eyes turned his way as he tread a dreaded sigh upon the dirt. Those so taken were far too few to break free the fettered crowd.

“…And there weren’t any signs! Surely you should have known.” The knight’s golden-blond was muddied from the tiring of his ordeal and his fair skin was tinged a red from the stiffness of the pommel from his sheath.

“I’m a doctor not a mystic. I at least know enough that they wouldn’t have willingly harmed anyone.”

“Then how do you explain what these people—what I saw?!”

“And I saw them leave that very village not long ago, chased by the dangers you lagged far too late to address. If *that*’s enough proof, then next you’ll say there’re corpses walking. Where’s the science in that.” It was a frenzied back and forth, two men tapping wrists with not a moment’s draw for breath, somehow spared of Darren’s usual tied of tongue.

“If you give them up now we can at least provide some peace of mind.”

“For whom?! I told you they haven’t been back since, not since those very same villagers last saw them drawing that tarnation last away. Shouldn’t you rather be concerned for their safety rather than condemning them?” Hezran was more than a little impressed, and a slight bit astounded, by the level of calm endearment Darren lavished in their praise. *It really wouldn’t be right…*

“If it’s really as you say then you should have no fear. Merely let come through and be on with it.”

“And let you and half these…these…demons come trampling over everything we’ve built. Have you seen their eyes? Have you seen your eyes?”

“That’s enough! Any more and you will be held in contempt to the Ardent Council—“

“That really is enough.” Slipping from the sidelines Hezran approached Darren from behind. “Thank you doctor, you’ve been truly wonderful…and I’m sorry.” A parting apology whispered to Darren’s ears only, Hezran wrapped his hand around their savior’s neck, his devil’s hand. “Dear knight, the sun has long since passed, and wouldn’t you say it’s time for rest? Your sun is far too blinding.”

Gasps came from the crowd: Anger, but also cooling fear.

“You would stoop so low…”

“Perhaps; perhaps not. Is it really something you can afford?”

“And the crime?”

“…There’s been far worse.” A glint of hatred, perhaps vengeance, but now concentrated…as Hezran wanted. The knight stood at the edge of his blade, honest purpose holding him from behind and at the front. *Next*—

*“Youuuuuu!!!”* From within the crowd a rough-hewn stone, a ball of dirt soared straight and true, fueled by a narrowed, pure hatred; like a dagger, before being crushed to powdered dust within that hated claw. Although flinched by the shadow, it was not something that would have ever reached. “I’ll kill you!! I’ll definitely kill you!!!”

Even so, its pain still held. Looking back those bloodied fingers scratching out beyond a sea of straining arms Hezran felt it truly, deeply; like a diseased file grating against an already broken scab, it scarred him like no other.

No doubt he had caused similar in the past; and going forward likely only more. He had always avoided staring it in the face, whether from want or cause. Now that he saw it straight, it only made him more determined to chip it all away; how much so depending on the degree to which he pursued his similar rage. He would get to the source—

“Hey!”

Wallowing in malice, it was and opening for which Hezran would not be forgiven as a steel sliver entered through to blade; creating a gaping gash that left his shoulder limp. Where Darren’s voice had failed, the deathly chill brought Hezran back before a fatal blow was struck.

Pulling away, Hezran felt a charge and smelled seared flesh. “Calm down…” The pain in his shoulder was deep, so much he was caught for breath, and unlike others he felt its healing somehow more prolonged. “I won’t say it’s wrong to pursue vengeance; that’d be far too hypocritical of me… Still if you only concentrate on that you won’t get anywhere. Take your time; I’ll wait as long as necessary…” In that moment Hezran struck out with his hidden blade. “Most of all I have no intention of falling here.” The soldier dropped his piercing thorn through jarred fingers and from the ground the sword’s once covered hilt revealed a crackling gleam. *So it was like that, though I can’t imagine not on purpose,* for none were greedier than them; such treasure would hardly go unnoticed.

The open burn still tingling, Hezran cast Darren aside and out of view, as violent as he could in gentleness. “Chase me if you will, but it’ll take more than a few sparks to strike me down.” With a brave face Hezran ran into the darkness, a trail of splattered blotches creating a path in his wake as the constant flow of dizziness left him scarce advantage to those he dragged behind.

Weaving through a final furrowed path of trees he heard the sound of water accompanying the sight of open air. Turning his back along the cliff he caught a glimpse of rocky shallows, keen as if waiting to cement his show. He could already see the light; there was no time for regret or changing plans—only to tip his heels and wait patiently…ever so patiently…for the cleanse of rapid waters to embrace.

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Spur and Palm

The door creaked as Darren walked back inside, tired and bruised but for the most part none the worse. It had taken a while until they were finally convinced, but after the hostage taking and the roughing up they had finally let him tend their wounds. The sun had already begun to rise by the time he finished seeing to the more serious cases and rashes of broken bones caused by the night’s endeavours.

“How was it?” Having woken up in Darren’s absence, by now Anise’s elbow had been grooved firmly to the table from which she waited. It seemed at least she’d been calm enough to read his note before running of, but that had done little to calm her prickly gaze.

“Not bad… They were fairly forgiving all and all.” While there were still a few distrusting eyes and some animosity, he had seen much worse at other sites.

“That idiot! How dare he?”

“Now, now, they didn’t have a choice. If things hadn’t gone like this there would have been far worse to pay.” It was more frightening an ordeal than he had imagined on paper; nonetheless the gambit had paid off. Not only had they managed to supplement an escape, but also distract wary eyes as part of process. He was not one to complain.

“I know! And I’m angry more than anything just because of that.” Where Darren was all logic, she spoke with emotion; perhaps that’s what made them work so well together. “Next time I see him I swear I’ll strangle him to death.”

“I remember hearing similar from you before.” The words brought Darren back to his younger days of wanderings, and how they had met.

“And what do you think you were doing letting things end up like that!”

“I’m terribly sorry!” If only he had never stepped down into that one ravine… But then he always felt grateful to have her by his side. “Did everything turn out alright in here?”

“More than fine.” A crease could be seen on the carpet beneath Darren’s desk. “Seriously, I’ll never get how you catch wind of stuff like this.”

“I made a promise,” promise to who he would not say. “I’ll definitely tell you later.”

“You’d damn well better… Now, are you hungry? There’re some leftovers from earlier if you want them?”

“Gladly!”

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Path

*Drip, drip, drip.* Frail candlelight lit rays of countless spears dangling the tops of twisting depths: cavernous and damp yet simultaneously dry and confining.

Constant hardened echoes and lingering flickering shadows battered the lonely soul’s traversal, familiarity serving no guard for countless branches of dark devil’s whispers that whittled fragile strings of memories to grow ever dimmer. The ease of letting squinting eyes close offering momentary fear to endless nothingness; the hard of widening the gap to glimpse maddening terror in the full and wade against its constant flow for a glimpse of hope.

The endless maze leaves any demon return not fully them, always one wrong turn repelled and still more yet to travel.

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Loneliness

When Hezran woke he found himself laid flat across a bed of smoothed gravel, a thin sheet of coarser linen between him and the rocky surface just below. The scattered embers of a waning fire warmed him from nearby; beside him a silent shadow, bobbing its head in rest.

“So it worked out fine. I’m glad.” It was still dark as he brought his hand to a gentle rest on her tangled hair. Whether the sun had gone for circle or waited just beyond the edge he could not know, but he did know that he was thankful for her efforts.

Looking sideways he glimpsed the remains of a battered net flapping across the river’s width. A faltering sigh of relief escaped, knowing how precariously it had held for time to fish him out.

His clothes, brimmed with grit, had mostly dried and the serene night’s breeze brought a silent chill to that quivered in his bones. The fire had done well enough, but still he felt the beginnings of a nasal itch.

*Ah…* Beyondcrossed arms and scrunched up knees Hezran spotted a bundle just beyond his feet, neatly strung to form four neat squares of warmth. Unbinding the winding thread revealed a familiar robe, a copy that made clear as night and day the wear their travails. Spotted holes and rampant gashes, needless be said the countless stains; reduced to little more than patchwork. He would have changed right then to stave the chill were it not for the creep of parched cracks making note within his throat. *Water… I need water….*

Kneeling by the river he cusped his hands to drink, but the frantic torrent only served to wet his lips. He needed a cup, a bowl, a bottle: a rounded vessel of any sorts. Casting eyes revealed a trail of scattered objects trailing a slightly crumpled pack and within he found for what he searched: a pot or a kettle of sort, with holes but not so much that it wouldn’t hold some rain. *It’s a bit…old-fashioned, but I should be able to make it work*. Bringing it to dip suffused a murky glimmer in its depths that Hezran made no short hesitation to bring to mouth. The taste was acrid and gritty; and ever so refreshing.

Filling up once more, and with a couple dry sticks gathered from nearby, Hezran soon had a steady steam growing over renewed flames. Given the shallowness of the vessel it would take several trips and time. Still, wrapped by soothing orange and embrace by the steady, mild tones of bubbles surfacing he felt himself slowly lulled away. One seconds, two seconds…however long had it been and then…

Hezran was startled from his nodding wakefulness by the screeching whistle of a pot once left unchecked. Without thinking he crabbed lifting the pot from its cradle only to feel a tremendous heat before nearly dropping it. Reflexively he brought his *fingers* to his mouth to realize once more, how even the most simple things had changed. He tasted fur and realized how he had been protected from the most casual of burns. It welled a strange feeling up within his throat: a touch bitter and sometimes sweet; before a cleansing rustle echoed from behind. Looking back he saw Reivyn raise her head, turning in a daze.

“Sorry, did I wake you? You can go back to sleep.” Reivyn simply shook her head and strolled to sit beside him. Resting her head against his arm, still aching from lightning’s scar, she stared into the glowing embers.

“Are you thirsty?” Exhausted, she nudged once. Hezran took one of the pre-prepared canteens he had found earlier in the pack, only once the imminent need had all but died. He poured some liquid into her waiting mouth. Later he would refill it best he could, using cloth to filter most of the worst, but for now, this moment at least, he just felt blissful…to sit there, side by side, in simple silence.

…For the first time he heard it: a wordless song, foreign in resonance and yet somehow solemn in yearning; slipping from that voiceless mouth. It was a tune too beautiful, too dearly loved, and yet why was it that it brought phantom tears to him; real ones to her? Why did she sing it so, if it only brought a hollow pain to chest; a pain she could not hope to understand? Perhaps it was that she wanted to understand, that single memory passed free from anger to her budding heart. And like a lullaby to let all evils rest, together they slipped off into the deep unknown…

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Entwining Fates

“Boss!” Annoying…interrupting his rest. He wanted to roll around a little longer. “Hey! Boss!”

“Ugh… What is it?” But his covers were tore off and he was greeted by a frightful grin full of scars and missing teeth enough to send stouter corpses back to grave. “The last thing I want is to see you ugly face so early in the morning. …Stop smiling would you, it’s creeping me out.”

“We got a letter!”

“A letter? All the way out here?” In the middle nowhere, who would know where they were?

“C’mon, don’t be like that. It’s Sis! Sis!”

*Sis…? Sis!* “Well hand it over already!” As if he would wait any longer, snatching the paper from waiting hand with force enough to tear. “Let’s see here. ‘Sorry for contacting you so late…been eating properly; keeping up with your practice… There’s been some trouble… I’d like you to help…’ As if there’s any need to ask.” He would do anything—they all would do anything if it meant they could help her, smiling all the while. At least that was until he read the whole way through.

“Boss?!” Stunned, the goon flailed wildly in a futile struggle to catch scrapped slivers weaving through the air.

“…going to bed.”

“What?” The words had been whispered so quietly that they were hard to catch.

“I’m going back to bed!” With all the petulance of a whining teen fresh in puberty, as he more rightfully was, the youth buried himself once more.

“C’mon don’t be like that. Didn’t we all agree? That’d she be better off? It’s what she wanted.”

But no amount of minor coaxing would lift the little leader from his fallen spirts. “Don’t care! I’ll never accept it!”

“Hey! We’re all ready to leave… What’s taking so long?” From outside a slighter woman, short black hair and rough bandana, entered the dugout. “Not again.”

“It’ll just be a little while. I think.”

“We all loved her; sometimes love’s too strong.” They all may have not been bound by blood, but they were family none the less. “I know, I’ll make him some warm milk with fruit, like sis used to.”

“Thanks for that.”

“Can’t promise it’ll turn out as well. Sis always did try an’ teach me, but back then I was more savage than woman. Didn’t care to learn.”

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Gathering Cloud

Waking up late next morning it was a beautiful day clear of wind and the sun was beating high; so strongly in fact that even the more shaded pebbles were burning to the touch. Half in part to escape the belting heat, unusual for the time of year as the cold was fast approaching, they had fled away from the river’s side and to the shaded linings of the forest’s trees, despite the ominous mists that hanged around them. The other portion of their purpose lay in the weathered sheet strung tenderly between Hezran’s uneven grasps.

Darren would have gotten quite the kick seeing Hezran’s face on having found the map along with their belongings. It was something of a treasure to the rooted man no longer travelling and came along with a solemn note: *You better take care of it. It won’t just me that’s after you If you don’t*; as if he had needed telling twice. More than just a map it was an object steeped heavy, deep with memories. Memories of travels and meetings, none of which without would have made today…today—or for which future they would now embark.

Hezran still remembered their conversations, vague about homes lost and purposes left undone: *Then why don’t you go?* At first Hezran would come up with a billion excuses: time, trouble, safety; warmth. But chased out as they were at the very end, every and any excuse he might have had were thrown straight out the window. And perhaps that is what he wanted.

*We shouldn’t be…far?* That was the most he could make of it. While the intermittent blotches and fades of time certainly caused their difficulties, the true problem was more acute, and present. For whatever the map may have been worth in the past it could only do so well in a changing land.

Down beneath Hezran’s feet laid a crumbled trail of broken stone, rooted deep by strangling ivy vines. Countless times they had walked to follow only to find themselves twisted off the path, as if kept at bay by a staying hand. A short while ago, Reivyn had begun to falter; only barely keeping up as she attempted in secret to nurse her swelling feet. *Maybe we should rest.* He would have preferred to reach their destination, there was bound to be better shelter there, but it would hardly be right to force her young body to strain further from his selfishness.

However, before he got to speaking she had already rushed ahead, as if to keep those staying words at bay—no doubt purposefully to keep his words at bay. She did not want to be a burden; she did not want to be so weak. He had a feeling those thoughts were hers. And he would not have thought otherwise but to let her make her choice, without a scathing judgement. Although he felt she should stop and care, her brazen action only served to make him happy. They were the actions of true and honest youth…one so unlike the one he had been, and she had started. And so he would not stop her but rather chose to tread along beside her.

As if taking that naive strength in mind their path seemed clearer, less clouded than before. Soon enough they saw something else, other than broken road and rampant wilds amidst the shallow fog.

“This must be it.” Though it was difficult to tell from distance, there just ahead, lied what they had come looking for. From here deep in the horizon the place might seem like nothing more than mossy boulders but squinting allowed Hezran to see differently. Amidst the fallen rubble and tilted trees there was structure: crumbling openings and jutted doors, he even thought he could make out the shape of a lump-like well, long since filled by seasons. Getting closer it became more and more obvious how little had changed: like a world trapped in time amidst decay; an ancient ruin of civilization crumbling and yet no different from the present.

“Let’s take a rest.” Thankfully, along with decay came smoothing and corners that once were sharp now made for ample sitting. Reivyn mimicked him as he reached for water. Taking out the canteen Hezran gave it a little shake and it echoed back a resounding slosh. He had used up a surprising amount on the trip here, no doubt for her the same. Without a new source they could not hope to stay so long.

As he had thought from far away the well was completely covered and looking around he could make out no other source. They might have found something in clearing the rubble to search one of the many small buildings that littered the landscape, frozen in midst of collapse; however, any such contents within would have no doubt have gone long since putrid. *I thought it might be better after so much time had passed…* It was not any easier; whether it was of related or some other cause no less gruesome. He still saw faces of agony in the pools of brown that had gathered on the ground, the demon’s roots sucking greedily at their feet. *But most of all…*

It was quiet, unbelievably quiet, drinking those last few preserving drips. He had thought so as they came but it was strange. No flaps or growls; pitter-pattering or rustling. It was as if anything and everything were made to keep away…and if so what was keeping them. *Though, maybe I spoke to soon.*

A metallic sound rang out, at strict odds against the silent landscape. Searching for the source, found much closer than he’d first thought, Hezran saw Reivyn kneeling with her hand to the ground. At first he thought maybe it was the beginning of a budding playful side, however, her face was far too serious; scrunched up as if she had caught sight some spiteful disease crawling just inches beneath her feet.

Getting down beside her Hezran saw what she had seen. Amidst the blackened marks of scorched earth still unhealed, something of subtly different colour gleamed from beneath the star-stud droplets. *This is…*

Another familiarity from his time away from earth: the sheen of processed metal interlocked. Similar in composition to that city flying in the sky, it was something that should have had no place down here…or so he once had thought, but this piece of history was clearly ingrained; pristine. He had always thought it strange, how those who strutted through the clouds and claimed god could know so little about their home. Of course they knew enough to run it steady, but that was all anyone was allowed to care to know. Perhaps the answer—

Frightened neighs preceded a thundering gallop. In the distance a tattered cart wheeled its way through the rubble, chased near behind by something other; a wheeled beast smogged by burning smoke. As the two sped closer Hezran caught sight of two riders: one the chased and one the chasing; and with the next instant brought a chilling sting across his cheek. With a sound both sharp and piercing—more clear than he had ever heard before—blood was drawn; and seeing the blooming blotches in the earth, it was clear that more were left to come. Unlike the primal bolts he knew so well this was something colder and without feeling—something that would deliver unforgiving death—and without a stave for magic he could hardly hope to fight. It was a sorry thing for those in peril, but the only logical choice to make was to hide or run. “Rei— Reivyn!”

It was already too late. Within the moment of his thoughts the scene had already begun to unfold. The calm, sometimes cold girl he knew rushed forth like a blazing ball of fire unperturbed by fatal shots.

*There’s really no helping it now. If you can’t stop them, you’ve got to join them.* Fortunately the bullets did not seem well aimed and from the looks of the dirtied, goggled face that peeked atop the chassis the mechanical’s design was far from optimal.

Displaying a speed and purpose Hezran had never seen of her before, Reivyn closed in, a slight foreboding pulse reverberating from the claw glimpsed from the fabric trailing on behind her; along with a dull shine glazing through her pocket’s fabric. *Oi, oi. That’s not what it think is it…?* Hezran had seen such glows many times before, though without a catalyst he would have thought it impossible, for the stones’ greed would only otherwise take only the most talented of flesh. The side-effects were often drastic: body decay, deadly sickness, organ loss and other such that left their wielders more cavity than living if at all; though that was only humans, still… “Stop! It’s too dangerous!”

Hezran’s worry went unheeded as the pulse intensified and before his very eyes he saw Reivyn’s arm twist and morph to the worst of his imagination. As she swung forward the claw continued to grow to an unfathomable, unwieldy size; hardening like bone and taking on a greenish-silver tinge not completely unlike that of the behemoth which had chased them down only nights before. The instant it clawed down a clear sweat and terror could be seen streaming down the rider’s face.

With a crunching ring the two clashed in a blast of air, thrust against thrust; force against force. Metal creaked and twisted, hardened flesh cracked and split, until in the end both stopped silent as the billowing smoke gave way to silent spurts of fire and the glowing hand shrunk to naught.

While the fleeing carriage tripped to a stop Hezran was already rushing to Reivyn’s side. As she fell silent in his arms he thought the worst. Putting his ear to her mouth brought forth shallower breath than he remembered, though he took solace that there was still a steady rhythm. Her pulse seemed fine and at least no fever betrayed from within her drooping eyes. “Rest.” She did not even have the strength to nod, only just to close her eyes. Though her claw was damaged it already seemed begun to heal, the worst left to the drain, but Hezran wrapped the bandages tightly nonetheless. *Damn it! You had me worried there.* He’d make sure to scold her good when she woke up.

“Geez, I’m the one who should be worried about. What the hell was that? Ah, haha, ah…” Crawling from the wreckage was a man, a young teen, his tune quick to change upon seeing a frightening face. “Sorry… I-I mean drop everything you’re carrying in the name of the Duskwind bandits. You’d better do it before my mates come out, I’m telling you… I’m sure they’ll come… Please come!”

It was almost comical, the bravado the boy claimed display brave above his shaking knees—only more so when a lasso fell about his waist to tie him with his twisted hunk of steel. “Well then I guess we better leave before they get here.” Wearing a wide-edged cap and with a weighted, silvered belt at his waist an older gentleman, his beard grizzled by trial and the wear of time, bowed his head in thanks. “I’d offer you a ride…” Hesitation would have been understandable after what had happened; but perhaps the man had been too busy fleeing to have seen, or even cared.

“Thank you. She’d appreciate it.”

“You’re very welcome.” With a beckoning hand, the man led Hezran up to his cart. There they stopped a second as a length of velvet was unwound to stretch across the back. As gentle as he could Hezran laid down the sleeping princess for a well-earned rest.

“Hey! You’re not leaving me here are you? You can’t be…for real…” Was he crying? “I-I can help you. How are you going to find your back?! I know this place like the back of my hand.”

“And why should we believe you? You could be leading us right into a trap.”

“Are you kidding me? After seeing that? It’s not like they’d care what happens to me anyway. See, I’m just a kid to them.” While a pang of guilt did surface, it would take a lot more than a little whining to earn Hezran’s forgiveness.

“The horses are tired…” The man had a point. It had been a hectic day for all of them; they all needed rest and water, soon.

“Ah, fine. But remember *boy*, I’m ready to slit you’re throat at any time.”

“He he, how could I forget…?” With that they brought along their little bandit king, cuffed without his chariot, and set on their guided journey back out of the sheltered forest; back onto the open road.

--

Watchers

Once the others left the scene, two shadows darted forth from hiding. One went straight for the broken vehicle, while the other stared into the distance with worry on their face. “Are you sure that was alright?”

“It’s a good chance, besides that’s what Sis wanted. If we’re lucky he’ll have grown some hair by the time he’s back.”

“I know, but still…”

“Jord, you’re always to god damn soft on him y’know. As if you weren’t flabby ‘nough yourself.” Jord’s bulging waist gave a slight jiggle from her backhand slap. “Besides we’ll keep an eye on him.”

“Suppose your right.” Now wasn’t the time for frowns, things had only just begun to change.

“Your smiling’s really just as unnerving every time. I swear if we weren’t brigands…” What sort of life would they be leading? “Never mind, let’s just collect the scrap and get going. Gotta bring it back to the doc for fixin’ anyways.”

“Aye aye, Linde.”

--

The Queen of Hearts

“How is it?”

“With the doctor’s help wounds are healing and the townspeople have been able to spare some peace of mind to concentrate on rebuilding. As reported earlier at the end of the search nothing was found besides a trail of dust and some still moist darkened splotches. In any case a patrol has been set up around the perimeter and I believe we can rightly say the village is secure.”

“Is that so…” Just a few days in, the wounds were still fresh and though some wishes had been answered, particularly to Lodis, they paled far in comparison to what had been lost.

“Sir… About the adjutant…” The young report pulled one arm tightly to her side. Fresh out of training, she had only just donned her garb and might not have any right to speak; especially considering whose role she had come to take.

“Thank you…but let’s speak of that some other time.” *Right now…*“first we should think of what it means.” He did not blame her, but neither was he ready to accept her, not so quickly at least.

“You should know exactly what it means!” Showing fierce grace entirely odds to the wailing still heard of mourning spirits entered another lady, dressed far too fanciful for so far out in the sticks. “It means they killed it off. I can’t imagine how they managed but they did, and that is something that absolutely cannot be forgiven.”

“How dare you!” Once timid, second brash; the girl was quick to righteous anger. In Lodis’s mind such sincerity shone bright, but…

“Stop!” Before he would lose another one so soon, Lodis was swift to enact a punishing fist. “You should recognize the portrait at the very least!” The lofty lady in front of them might have appeared fragile and slight as a single flower waving in the wind, but beneath that unyielding beauty lied poisonous thorns aplenty; enough to topple nations. “Please, accept our apologies.” Lodis kept his head rubbed in the dirt.

“S-sir!” Jarred at first and holding back pained tears, the girl was forced to follow.

“My, my, what a good captain we have here; so ready to stand in place of lesser. At least you know your place…or do you?” The woman twirled her umbrella lightly in the air, shadowing her face amidst the rainless day. “Well, never mind. I suppose I can be forgiving just this once, but *don’t* let it happen again.” With the pointed edge, she pressed against his hand as a reminder other pains to offer. “I don’t suppose I need tell you what needs be done.”

“We will commence the search at once.” The point dug deeper, light and crushing; yet never piercing through to vein. It was all Lodis could to keep his servile posture straight.

“And you will be at its head. Do not fail us… Although I suppose that in itself might be interesting as well.” Eerie laughter and a lick of crimson lip: No one could be more dangerous.

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One for the Road

In the distance, between the now barren ends of shrouded trees, a spot of unfiltered reddish light could be seen from the horizon, after what had seem like an eternity of endless wandering. On the razor’s edge, they had barely made it out in light of thirst, the merchant’s final offerings completely drained. By then Veil of Mirages had already begun to lose its autumn lustre although they were still a ways from snow. True to its name, every twist and turn brought with it new uncertainty as the blend of scenery had begun to look the same, but at last they had proof they weren’t played for fools. “Finally, a real span of water.”

“What’d you expect? I’ve got better things to do with my life than lose it here. …It’s not like I don’t feel at all responsible.” Since then Reivyn still hadn’t woken up. It was if she were in a sort of coma.

“There’s still time to see. Maybe we’ve been brought closer to danger than it seems,” but truth be told much of Hezran’s doubt had long since ceded. If there had really been such intent they would have already been caught in the forest, the bandits own backyard. *That not even a single one came… Could even that have been a bluff?* If so were did this suspicious little ape manage to get his toys.

“Ah, I see that look. Couldn’t you be just a little thankful? I got you out didn’t I? See, see.” Better yet they were right near the river’s flow. Finally they would be able to have relief.

“Let’s take a break here.” The driver of their coach had already brought his steeds to heel where their lapping created tremors against the waters flow.

Well, at least Hezran could be glad freed at last. Hopefully, without the constant shakes and bumping Reivyn would be able to get some better rest. With everyone as exhausted as they were and the sun on verge of set, they would need to stay the night.

It was an odd couple around the fire. Three men of all ages: one cuffed to a protruding stump and another tending to the glowing fire’s embers, while yet a third held a fevered, sickly girl to his lap, holding a just damped cloth to her fevered, and trembling head. For a time they simply sat quietly tending to thoughts and recollections.

In the end it was oldest who spoke first, curling back from the branches and the ash. “So, you’re heading north are you?” Hezran had mentioned it briefly while they were on the road; between the constant blabberings of directions and other whines.

“Yes. We have some relatives up there that we were planning to visit. Part foolishness and part pressed for time we managed to get ourselves a touch lost on our route, embarrassingly enough.” It was a simple story, only partly true. On the backside of the paper notice he had found hidden in their packs there had been a second message: regarding a further place of shelter. Hezran himself was still undecided; however, for now they were aimless and traversing the length of land would no doubt prove enlightening.

“Funny coincidence that. I was just on my way to make runs up there as it is…before you know what.” The old-timer pointed back to Stumpy with a sour grin, in safety’s hindsight a troubling situation turned all but comical. “What do you say, want to tag along? I could use the extra hands and it’d certainly feel safer that way.”

“I don’t have any particular indiscretions, but given what’s happened…” dragging another person into their problems would just be cruel. On the other hand one look told Hezran that crossing the river was not an option as it was: The torrent was far too rapid and more than a toss at width. There might have been bridges, but he would be the last to know where, and every drop of precious time they leaked was one more their potential pursuers gained in catching up. As it was the straightest course would be blending with the crowd, posing as just a small part of one of many travellers. As of yet none of them should have seen his face.

“If it’s that, I’ll be in as much trouble as you. Thieves aren’t so kind to discriminate, they’ll just take everything.”

“Ah that. I’d forgotten about that.” Thieves were just thieves, but if they held any more of those monstrous contraptions, likened to an iron devil birthed in flame spreading forth a fearful rain, a completely different story could be made; mere flesh and bone would not hold up. Maybe if he could bring that strange power to the fore once more Hezran might be able to do something, though even then it would have been a long shot; he could still hardly believe what had happened.

Thinking back he remembered the feeling he had felt from Reivyn. It had been similar to the air she had had when she was sinking into the depths—but stronger and more conscious, almost like there were no need for taking over given an instinctual hate against creation. Hezran had felt it strongly through their bond…and he had known he never wanted her to feel that way again. Was there some meaning?

“You know! You’ve been going at it for a while now and I don’t even get a ‘you’ or a ‘him’, it’s just that. That!” Ah yes, there was that. That thing tied so brazening to its knotted stump now shriveled beneath the singe of still dewed venom. “I-I just really hope you’d spare the mercy to, oh I don’t know, *not* leave me stranded here like this.” A therian howl echoed against the backdrop of a yellow bulb surfacing above the clouds “I’m not sure I’d survive the night…”

“Well, let’s see here…? You seem more than energetic enough and I’m sure a bandit must have a few useful talents, wedging their way out of ropes being one of them.”

“Please! Leave that kind of stuff for the mages. Without his tools even a magician couldn’t cut himself free.” A standing ovation for wit…was not. “And I do have a name you know. It’s Cull. Cull!”

“Really! Seems like it’s just a few cuts short of something else, though maybe still too few…but I guess the few extra letters would be too much praise our noble little thief.”

“Oh, shut up… It’s not like I don’t feel…” The boy could not be more obvious, a pale flush, scarring his pretty face, but in his youth could not bring to say the word. Tough and prickled at the skin, the boy’s heart was still yet glass and though Hezran was slow to admit, there was a touch of sweetness to those bluffs.

“Speaking of which, you’re not all that jittered considering what almost happened to you?” It wasn’t hard to imagine those claws cleaving through the steel. One wrong angle might have rendered the boy to nothing.

“Crazy’s everywhere if you let yourself look. Got tired of jumping every time …And what do you mean jittered?!” *I won’t lose,* though the conveying posture was turned a bit strange with his hands roped as such.

“True enough, however, it is interesting that you’d say let?” It was word, hinting at something suppressed or otherwise forgone in favor of peaceful ignorance and sanity of mind. The dusty caricature held secret deep within his hidden pocket was more than proof enough. It told of tragedies forgotten or forced to forget; tragedies untold and or punished for the telling; tragedies that, as apparent from a bird’s-eye view, would never let or be able to forget. Ugliness perpetrated everywhere between the grains of beauty, but from a distance all scenery seemed as if smooth and without blemish, as much as the mind could wish. The question being—

“…”

—did the boy really know nothing or was he simply unwilling to speak for fear of foul branding?

“Well, I guess that’s fine for now.” Regardless Hezran had no intention of further prying. Although the boy’s steed was strange, it was not completely foreign of possibility. The sky had similar; otherwise they could not reach the ground. That and the boy had kept his promise. “So, Cull. What exactly do you expect us to do with you then?”

“If you would at least cut my ropes and let me run?”

“And risk having you coming back in force?” A tentative suggestion immediately knocked down, it seemed to be the end of the road…

“How about we bring him along a while? At least until we cross the river over. It should be harder to follow then.” From the primary victim, the suggestion was more forgiving than some would have expected or even liked, however, there was a certain logic sounded. “I don’t think you need to worry about the little lady anymore neither.”

“What…” A gasp caught in Hezran’s throat, he looked down to see a pair of fluttering lashes dampening thirsty eyes. “You’re awake! …Reivyn?” Lifting her head closer to his chest he looked straight into her eyes, chilled eyes like ice, reminiscent of glacial flows slowly retained of warmth. For a moment it was as if she had returned back then to that emptiness, the very same she had first showed and later swallowed…but perhaps it was just fearful imagination at play for at the next moment she stared back the moist warmth of relief clouding those contrasted jewels.

Hezran was flooded with a mix of emotion: joy, fear, relief, and anger all at once. He was just happy, unbelievably happy, and yet scared of what might have happened…what could very well happen still. Thank the Ardent that she woke, but how dare she take such risk and danger upon herself…how dare he be so weak, unable to keep her safe from harm.

Reivyn let out a little yelp, stung at the cheek, before being immediately smothered by wholesome heart. Hezran could not forgive her and yet he had to forgive, and though surprised and teared at first the girl’s dampness soon nuzzled warm against his chest.

“…Why do I have to see this?” The complainant could do nothing less, stuck as he was to witness as was his heart to burn. It might have been a trick that some longing cold be sensed beneath that tone.

Even so, Hezran felt a slight tinge of embarrassment from his unbridled soul, and perhaps a newfound sense of comradery, as the pair began to separate. “I apologize.”

“It’s alright…” Wide-eyed and mouth gaped Cull had no choice to play along. “Still, what’s going to happen?”

“…I suppose it wouldn’t be too harmful to have you along for a while—as long as that’s alright with you, of course?” It was the merchant’s own suggestion, but Hezran felt he might as well make sure; which is why he found it strange that there was no immediate response. More than that beneath the dulling embers of the now faltering blaze the wrinkles that dotted the sluggish turning hand seemed all the deeper trailing beneath a downcast gaze. “…Hello?”

“Sorry.” The man’s eyes stayed listless. “Was just thinking back on something.”

It was really late. “Maybe we should get some rest.”

“I think you’re right…” Clear removed of strength, the greyer beard turned slow beneath his furs before both Hezran and Reivyn shortly followed.

“Hey! A little help here?” As the final embers gave way to nothing only Cull was left shivering in the dark. “Come guys you could at least give me a blanket— Achoo!”

--

Spinning Gears

“So doc, you think you’ll be able to fix it.” The man sweated visibly beneath torchlight, perspiring more than the cold dankness would pertain.

“Quite a bit of the outer carapace has been sheared off and with the inner workmanship being as microscopic as it… Normally I would deem it nigh impossible.” The doctor pulled one hand back to stay despair, as he slid the other caringly along its cool, steel frame. “That said we are fortunate in that I already have the mappings. It still boggles the mind, how technologically advanced our forefathers must have been, creating a mechanism so elaborate. I can’t count the number of times I’d nearly lost a gear or was burned by sparking circuitry putting this thing together in the first place.”

“So—“

“I could try to fix it, however…I don’t think I will.” The doc’s answer was both decisive and final.

“No!” Head hung lower than one sentenced to the gallows yearned; Jord glimpsed frantically left and right as if waiting for some thirsty ghoul to attack from the black parts of his sight. He hated to be the bearer of bad news.

“This is good…”

“Doc?” Jord didn’t have the knowledge to understand, all he saw was a man muttering as he fumble through a pile of scrap.

“You couldn’t have timed it better.” The doctor beckoned Jord towards the passage on the right, guiding him as they slipped through branching trails of snaking rock. “There’s actually something I’ve been working on—a long term project of sorts—and I was just contemplating what to do. You see I’ve come up short due to a stark lack for resources. Of course, I could build the pieces from scratch; however, with our current *science* the prospects are, shall we say, lamentable. I doubt even if I had access to my labs.”

“What about the black market?”

“That poses other problems. Even through my contacts it was only trickling down in pieces. Frankly at the rate I was going I wasn’t sure I would be able to make it on time.” Pulling to the head of the winding gap they reached yet another crevice, this one several times larger than the last. “Honestly, I couldn’t be more grateful.”

The doctor grabbed a cord hanging from the side and as he pulled lifted the curtained darkness spread enormously through the room, to reveal the object that lay beneath.

“…This is!”

“It’s something that’ll be needed soon. Without it his ambitions and our hope; they won’t be able to take flight.”

--

Black Box

She was confined within a cube of translucent edges surrounded by a cloud of unending darkness. Known and silent screaming specters lapped freely at her doorstep, but she was not afraid they would ever enter, for she even as they pressed against the surface, even if the box shrunk infinitesimally small around her, whatever remained would be hers alone, even if it was just a tiny corner.

She was sure there was something she was forgetting, nagging at the depths of her mind, but the longer she stayed, crouching her chin to her knees, the less and less it seemed to matter; the less anything seemed to matter. Oh, how nice it would be to vanish…silent and peaceful into nothingness…

“Uh-uh-uh.” A voice! Was it a voice or was it just her imagination? She did not feel anything.

Paid no heed, a glowing ember of dark appeared within her narrowed line of sight. How had it slipped in? Why was it interrupting her rest? It did not matter…but somehow familiar.

The shadow wagged its finger as if an owner lovingly berating of his most precious, bestest four-legged friend; one in need of putting down. Dropping more fully into vision it opened her rigid palms, depositing a crime—something both heavy and meaningful—as to weigh her soul, “It’s too soon for you to be here yet…“ Loving and cruel, a voice of infinite care mixed with indescribable hatred; if chosen angel or demon it would most likely be the latter; a familiar demon.

Still, between their parting hands a pulse of pure colour left untainted blossomed brightly. A circuit of light stretching on and through to infinitely unknown horizons, intruding on her supposed emptiness with a purpose and path presented.

“This one will show you back…” With a shove she was thrust towards the frightful warmth and blindness. “Try not to get swallowed.”

--

Death Toll

On every morn, with an insatiable hunger it stalked over countless trees in search of meat. It was king of the sky and the entire world below it. Every beast scattered in its footsteps had long lost their wings for any hopes to fly above. Each step it took crunched the land, disturbing those few remained but half its size, which swelled but held their anger. And the king left them with snorts of mild amusement that blew them off their feet. Clawless and hairless they stood as nothing against it and in turn it allowed an agonized continuity to their existences so long as they cultured food for which to trade it meals.

…And so it was the king’s naivety to fail to recognize the greatest meal of them all. Big of head but also foot, a single stretch of thread mended and woven thousands fold caught its toe, in an instant causing it to tumble down below; where spines of rock that once parted in its wake jutted as fierce as the most pointed of executioners’ pikes.

It was cold so cold…and then brazen in warmth. The fluttering beasts and birds once miniatures, now giants thrice its size, licked salaciously as blood met blaze.

Scoops of flesh. *So this is how it feels to be eaten…*

It was pained. She felt pain even as its numbness spread. It was dying; she would die as well if she stayed longer.

*She…?*

--

The Seas of Life

“Next.”

Waiting with bated breath, Hezran watched the gate approach from his seat behind the line. It was not far past the break of dawn when they had come trotting along the stony path, a trip that would have been days reduced to paltry hours. The pleasant fumes of noontime smoke could be seen floating just beyond the massive curve of stoned-laid walls.

“Ne-next, forward.” Stifling a tremendous yawn between brief gasps of ice, rubbing padded hands between the arms brought paltry sense of warmth to the soldier’s watch, but for the moment both tears and sniffles turned bright upon their sight. “Why if it isn’t Joe Silverstien, back again this time of year I see.”

Lowering his brimmed cap Joe nodded silently, reeling his steeds to a stop.

Handed papers that would claim their purpose the guard barely took a glance, instead leaning forward to whisper a small few words dredged of sneakiness not all that well hidden. ”So, did you bring it?”

“Would you like a sample? I’m sure the cold’s took its toll.” Reaching briefly to the back Joe brought forth a hefty flagon, brown and crusted and sealed by a cork.

“Much obliged…” The soldier took a swig of the offering. “Gaaahh! Got just as much kick as usual! Don’t know how I go a day without it!”

“Alcohol?” From the carton wafted a heavy sniff of sweet and spice, that Hezran would describe as almost glowing nectar to his nose…if not of rot.

“I’d rather you not tell bad of me! It’s juice, just juice… Here have a taste.” A slight bit of reluctance from both sides, Hezran snatched the bottle from gloved hands, first dripping a thimble’s worth to check its colour. “Ah! You’re wastin’ it like that!”

It was like nothing Hezran had seen before and all the same held of lifeless familiarity. Like dirty mud, it was brownish-black and brackish; such that it was hard to believe such a drink could be appetizing to the eager.

“What’s you’re so afraid for? Just take it all at once.”

“Don’t rush me…” Still, beholden of curiosity, Hezran brought the rim carefully to his mouth and tipped just a touch down through his throat. “Ugh… \*cough\* \*cough\*”

Thick and sweet as one expected, but at the same time a distinct sting, almost like a burning acid poured down one’s throat; booziness at its finest. If there was one thing it did do, it was certain to warm you up.

A depraved chuckle escaped the man’s lips from watching. “Surprised. Now give it back! Let me have another.” The guard clawed for grasp but Hezran quickly dodged away.

“I suppose it’s named apt enough: certainly water for the mud.” Not his first experience with such substanced settings, he was none the less inclined to keep at bay. “What’s fine for pleasure has its place, and that’s not now.” He himself never drank a drop. No matter the pains that duty brought he had vowed to experience them whole, clear in distraught.

“Sir, that’s harsh… It’s made from fruit that’s grown from marsh that’s all.” Though his grin without denial. “The fruit’s shape may be disturbing on its own…enough to bring suspicion on what lies beneath, but it’s all just superstition.”

“I’ve heard some even say the first to find their growth got so drunk off the fumes that he wandered down beneath the mud to become fertilizer himself.” Poking his head from the carriage behind Cull piped in, twinkling with curiosity and eager to display his knowledge.

“There’s that too! You’re friend sure knows his stuff.”

“Whether he’s friend or merchandise, we’ve yet to tell…a joke of course.” Shivering in the cold, Hezran was half-serious, having been stranded to listen to more tales. Whether he was believed or not, however, the stir of impatience could be felt from the travellers behind.

“All right! Just one more sip.” Slippery fellow as he was the soldier managed to catch Hezran a bit off guard.

Just as it seemed the man would seize his prize, Joe stashed the liquid gold behind. “The rest will cost you.” Greedy fingers rubbed together tellingly, putting their friend’s hopes momentarily at bay.

“Fine.” Along with their papers more than just a few silvered Knots were slipped between. “You know the place.”

“I’m not going to ask where you got this much. But business is business I suppose.” Joe tipped his hat once more.

“Brutal as always… Well, get along now. And welcome to Nementium.” Giving a light slap to the horse’s hind the guard sent them on their way before moving on to the next in line.

In on past the arching gateway where they could be protected from the wind’s battering by arching walls, they stepped onto cleaner, cobbled road. Different from the village, the buildings had faces smoothed and polished from the front; it was a façade that beamed prosperity…even as the shadows they cast hid the inner alleys from the toured sights.

From behind Reivyn, and even Cull, looked in awe at rampant, moving colours. Imagination stretched as if each day traded festivities and crowd for even greater, uninterrupted…

Nearby there was an exclamation; it seemed someone had lost their change. Closer yet Hezran felt a tremble as their cart shook, stopping inches short of trampling a young, scrap-strewn body splayed out in front of them, falling with a clink to cleaner ground. Seeing the precious glints rolling away the girl scrambled frantically to clutch them, without mind to how her actions dirtied her own blood.

She could not have been much more than Reivyn appeared by age, but where Reivyn lacked emotion this girl’s thinning limps had taken on a sickly lustre, her freckled face gaunt from genuine starvation. Though her fickle hands were stained by rust, there was still some youthful innocence about her as she splashed her gaze about in honest fear, eventually to rest her eyes on them.

“I-I’m s-ss-sorry!…” Terrified, the girl repeat her apologies over and over again shielded; trembling, shaking so much one could practically see the darling droplets tumbling from her face beneath her light brown strain of matted hair, so oily it clung to her eyes between bobs of head.

“Hey—” Caught himself surprised and in the midst of calling out, Hezran lost his chance for at that moment the thieved bellowed a targeted realization causing the fragile rabbit to hop away in search of a greater fear. Briefly in passing the embroidered gent gave a dirty glare proclaiming outsiders…showing even more apparent the shadows that lied beneath the light.

“It’s just the kind of word we live in…” Joe covered his eyes. As a merchant you might expect an attachment to value and money and a vehement distaste for such blunt methods…or perhaps tactic consent, but beneath the brim kept something more… Perhaps it was responsibility, sympathy, both or something else entirely; the man wrapped himself up so well it was hard to tell for sure.

“It’s necessary. I’m sure he had enough to go around.” Cull’s views were clear enough at least, if not besides the point.

No matter wealth or evil, everyone surely had some things for which they would rather their life be stolen than lose. The line between theft and murder was a blurry one, at times wide and others narrow; at times even slate and dark reversed. *…In a world where everyone steals, no one would create anything and everything would decay to nothing. What is really necessary then…?* The cart had already gone silent enough without Hezran’s thoughts on existances’ implications. *No matter…*

Soon they came across the river’s depths and its spanning arc. Plodding along the hollow surface the tide seemed particularly high as it rushed by, enough to feel the motion on their seats. At the source of reduced flow, the dam could be seen wavering under pressure. Trembles and creaks echoed loudly along the channel as wary watchers, many more than would be usual, shouted their frustrations at trying to make makeshift strappings bind. “Is it usually like this?”

“No… I can’t imagine ever.” As old as he was and given his business Joe would know. But why was it that Hezran had this foreboding sense of dread; almost a prophecy as was the shaking thunder to the ground? Tentatively he looked back towards Reivyn to see a detached quiver, as her misty see-through eye following an unknown source of peril. *What exactly is it that you see…*

That familiar face swivelled back towards him, the latter lens reluctant in its leaving, the other amber seemed to capture Hezran’s thoughts. Her mouth opened silently forming circles and purse and then… *I…something…squished…hate…*

Discombobulated phrases formed minutely in Hezran’s mind as if in answer. Terrifying… Crushing… Longing… Fear… *We should probably leave quickly…*

The city was not called the crossroads for nothing. The river west lead straight the ocean and to the east lay waste and crags. From the south they fled the citadel and to the north lay purging cliffs. One last gate stood between. But before that…

Musing in his thoughts Hezran realized they had already come to stop. Within a narrow hollow shadowed from the sun the horses drank at rest as Joe tied his cart to stake. “I’ve got to go discuss things with the master. Why don’t you take the time to check around? It’s probably you’re first time in such a place.” True in a sense. Given how automated everything was above the sheer scope of hustle and bustle was something that had long since vanished with the passage of time. “The capital might claim the sights, but the Skyless Market is like no other.”

Still, it was an interesting turn of phrase. On one hand limitless and on the other clouded from above. As much from lofty arrogance it might as well be the lasting dredged assertions of ironic truth. “We’ll take you up on that.” No sooner than he’d consented, a rough pouch flew Hezran’s way.

”Think of it as an early payment.”

“Are you sure it’s alright.” Cash in hand, it was enough to think they might just run off.

“Just don’t stray too far and make sure to be back in time to unload.” Perhaps it was proof of trust.

“And what about me?” Oh the poor, forgotten Cull…

“You, you’re coming with me.” Dragged by the cuffs, Cull followed Joe towards the door where they shortly disappeared within. It was a secret wonder whether the boyish thief might ever have return.

Treading out with Reivyn at his side dastard thoughts still scraped their place within his mind: thoughts that maybe they *should* just leave with purse in hand, that as suspects already suspected one more soldier would hardly do more harm, that staying as it was might endanger as another matter. *But then I wouldn’t be any different. I couldn’t claim to have changed or taken on my own will as whole. …That and what example would I set for her.* It may not have been the smart thing but it was what he wanted. A path abandoned of the chase of blood, for still so much more blood to be spilled. Hypocrisy.

For now he had decided that it was most important to make the most of the moment. *What would she enjoy? For a girl her age perhaps a toy, a top; perhaps dolls or clothes or…* He couldn’t even imagine, it was something he had never got the chance to.

Re-entering the main market, Hezran now caught in full sight its splendor. Vibrant sheets of fabrics and studded jewels; iron for placements and other assorted articles all polished twice over to stunning sheens.

From his side Reivyn grabbed his hand as much from wonder as from trepidation. Exposed to such sheer volumes, a moment’s let and it felt as if they would be swept away. “…Shall we go?” Grasping back he received a single squeeze of consent before braving forward.

Instantly it was if they were hit by a wall of torrential air, pushed to and fro by cosmic whimsy, hardly room to breathe. It felt almost suffocating beneath the waves and for a time they seemed close to running free of breath. Hezran had thought the village bad, but this…

Reaching the eye of the storm they could finally gasp for air. With everything set up along perimeters it seemed the center served as shallows. Latched together by the arm they were now afforded wider view, however, Reivyn’s toes still stood a touch too low to see above the flowing sea of heads.

…!

Careful not to upend their secret flaps he brought the girl up to shoulder, lifted high above to look past everything…to show her the world she could not see on her own, and though trembled spirts clung at first their pull soon lifted too.

A warmer smile spread cross Hezran’s face, as from her arm’s embrace he watched expressions twist and turn as wildly as he had never seen before, splintering boundaries once thought to have existed; all the reason for which he would remain a steady steed.

A tower stacked and center, they attracted more than just one odd gaze or two, beneath fluttered, silky cloth a shallow guised disdain. But none of that mattered…not as long as they were together.

Hezran felt a pinching clutch drag at the side of his cheek, forcing a ghastly grin that haunted back their gawkers. Without looking he knew. *That’s quite a line…* It seemed the word that caught her smote. She had always liked the sweeter fruits to bread or meat.

It was a colorful shop emblazed by many a shape, a sign of candied apples and rounded chocolates sparkling sweetly from above. Just less of noon, already droves of wanting little devils had dragged their minders to the door. A little apprehensive, or less than more inclined would have well described Hezran’s feelings at that moment, but nonetheless he brought them to the fore, carrying Reivyn to guide him all the while, catching the jealous eyes of a few glimpsing children.

Perhaps it was attune to those feelings that Hezran detected… a fiercer sort. It was that girl, the one of tumbling ashes that had fled passed into the slums. Ragged as ever she could only stare in from the shadows, palpable envy dripping from her mouth.

It might have been that she noticed his gaze, to a frightened hamster’s fearful praise, for within the instance her fragile frame slipped whole behind the wooden constructs occupying the alley’s front. A kind of sorry, bitter-sweetness for the soul.

Watching the fleeing mouse Hezran was so absorbed in thought that it took losing a few strings of hair to bring him back, where he realized how Reivyn pouted faintly as others slipped in front. “Sorry! Sorry!”

Bringing Reivyn down to level it was not long before her fiercest pull had brought them to the front. They were struck by cramped heat as they were stuffed inside, both sweaty and sickly sweet aroma tickling sourness in Hezran’s nose.

There was the audible tingling of a gasp, the first he had heard from Reivyn when they were not alone. *I suppose the choice was right.* If he were any brighter than he might have giggled himself no matter how strange he looked, but for that Hezran would have to settle just his mind.

On the left a child blew thinning bubbles to pop and to the left a longer, purplish tongue dangled from another’s mouth; everywhere a theme park of fancies for a child to see.

Reivyn’s eyes swam a delighted daze amongst the drink, finally settling on a single point. Caressed within a clever woven basket were pockets that burst with shimmering, jewelled balls of light; simple in shape and all the more bright.

Reaching for a hand Hezran felt his heart sink, a stone caught in his throat. *W-what is t-this… this price…* He felt faint.

A luxurious shop in the center of the kingdom, he guessed he should not have been surprised. More than any savings he had brought with them, only the resounding jingle of a loaded bag of generosity brought his bile back to bear. By the time they left the shop his pockets felt several times the shallower.

Still, that he could practically hear her singing as Reivyn popped one into her waiting mouth was more than worth the price to him. Sucking the first of sugared sweetness soon she popped another, looking sideways to the second bag Hezran held in question. “Ah, this. This is not for me, rather…”

Searching back a pace he found the alley, thankfully the girl was still waiting hungrily, as painful as it must have been for her. Getting past the crowd would be the problem, but then again he was confident in his aim.

Reivyn stood alarmed as she watched the bag float up and down against his hand and then… As a shot that glimmered blindingly against the sun, it soared straight and true to land softly on the unsuspecting girl’s chest, where she tumbled in protection once again. Getting up from the dust she looked left and right, before scuttling off for good.

Lowering his thumb, Hezran could hardly be sure his kindness was received, but well…that was part of life. Instead…“Don’t look at me like that… There! Can’t you hear it? I think Joe’s been calling for us.” Such a transparent lie, of course it would not get him off the hook, but he supposed he would have to chalk that up to being part of life as well.

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Nightbringer

A broken mind, a rampant fire; here he was again, running amidst the trees. A horizon set ablaze; his soul screamed mercy but those legs kept moving forward.

He did not want to see it…not again. A rolling reminder of his loss and greater echoed sin.

Past the bed of charcoal the crackling subsisted of screams. People dragged by ropes clawed frantically at anything and everything, to stall, to repel with what little frailty they could offer, clinging to that single moment longer, only to be chopped free shorter time and time again.

Parents cut down in front of children; loyal friends abandoned cut down to death just as soon as their betrayers. A mindless maddened massacre bereft by laughter at their gruesome game. Some ran; the others shot. An endless cycle of tilted slaughter repeated whence again; those fortunate to fall to nothing avoiding falling to worse creaking and shattering of moral conscience.

There was nothing he could do. He had to do nothing…trying to convince himself; running amidst the carnage blind, aiming for that sole place left most untouched yet not so far his chains would break. A fragile little house upon a crumbling little cape—such that the quakes of earth seemed liable to topple as it was—still standing tall as licking laps of flame turned dark its sides.

A glimmer of steel, a rotating axe, the tempting gleam called as a siren’s song still yet to sweet to suffer. Impelled reflex saw the blade embedded down just inches from where he moved, struck with enough force to cleave his hind in two. Behind it was a man, eyes steeped with measured ferocity as would a mother bear backed by the hunter’s rifle’s glare. A roaring flare and pounding claws…and so the rifle shot, an emblazoned pill of jagged earth bringing forth a timely end; two bodies dragged overwhelmed to earth.

Those terrible eyes gaping wide…staring…still warm, spiked by the jagged crease of bloodied veins, unsated.

“How long are you planning to sit there?” The words were of a solemn friend and teacher; familiar and forgiving as the hand that drew closure the corpse’s heavy lids. “You did good. It’s better this way.” It was something they both knew yet one found harder to understand. Were they were the lucky ones? and for the others a fate far worse than death.

A hardened gasp and frantic sobbing peeked from the shade beyond the slight opening of door; compelling sated, bloodied hands lift their staffs of death once more. It would be easier… It would be better…

“What are you doing?” A glint of anger, the eye was steady but the finger stopped, covered of its blighting sight. “Do you want them to go through the same thing we did?! Or is it the others?!”

“I don’t want to give up before it’s even started. If they suffer so be it! Even if they hate me… I will never choose to cut it short!” He had enough sins already: the sin of living; the sin of letting live. What was one more?

“Alright then! But you’re the one that takes them, not me!” Maybe it was then, the first time…a tragic rift disguised beneath the falling powdered flakes of orange snow.

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Shadow’s Length

Hezran woke with crash, tumbling from the thin frame that laid his bed, still stuck one leg to sheet covered by his pouring sweat and winded as tense as his own muscles from his sleep.

It had been a while since he had had that dream, so much he could have hoped to have forgotten, still as close as any of the perils of the starry night that came dreamt nearby. And now…

*Air…a-air…* Stumbling to the shuttered sill he grasped at the shut hinges, in stupor’s attempt to force against the steel lock. A creak and a crack; before the window broke full open and his hand swiped through to air.

Dumping his clouded head over the breach, flid dribbled from his mouth as a ball of sickness bursting up against his throat refused release. *Breathe… Breathe…*

The fresh air, the odorless air, the cold air of the night:Breath by breath he felt his head begin to empty. No feeling, nothingness…until his arms spread limply down below.

Relief washed over him. The memories still washed by, pictures filmed to his eyes, but that was all they were, just memories. Him, them, and after—the nightmare never ended; he had to live.

He heard a sniffling from behind. Turning Hezran saw Reivyn’s back. He stroked her head with a tender, shaking grasp.

Settling in a chair, he gazed at her in silence; comforted and was comforted; soon to nod again amidst the peace…

“Wait, you little bitch!” Those few remaining drops of sleep were coarsly shattered. A scuffle could be heard outside.

*Thank goodness…*though her face twinged, Reivyn was still silent in her bed. Lifting the covers further to around her ears, Hezran left her side to take a look.

In the alley Hezran saw a man and a girl, the former holding an amber bottle in one hand as the other tore mercilessly at the girl’s hair, stronger as she screamed. Never hitting back the girl only wailed as she was bruised and beaten, both spirit and body; grasped by a bottomless sense of fear.

With a rip she came free, loose some strands of air. Black and blue she ran, as red dripped from her gashes; with a limp to leg that would soon see her caught again, no matter what drunken hold dragged at the chasing steps. Not long a wait and there would be need for a body bag to carry, if the girl would be spared even that.

…Should he jump in?

It was likely a scene to happen nearly every day. No matter whether the man was her father or some other it was something absolutely unforgiveable, but what place had he to say? What could he hope to achieve in light of further failings? Would he be able to follow through as was…*or is my hope, my kindness really all a fake façade; a prolonging of insufferable suffering made worse for yet to come?*

As the girl passed beneath the window her face turned briefly up, purpled and lumped. A hand stuck to his heart: Hezran recognized that face, disfigured as was; the dribbling, lagging hand trailed shimmering powder from the punctured pouch clutched in-between.

How could she still smile?

A flutter of cloth shadowed amidst the moony light, Hezran landed amidst a cloud of dust.

Pushed to the side there was a crack as the drunkard dropped his bottle, spilling its liquid gold into the browning earth; just as surprised the girl held her hands tight around her sinking head, as if to wade the coming storm. It was a moment’s time bought as humanity more beastly than the wilder sort clashed with feelings made dull by withered souls, but…

*That didn’t take long.* Hezran supposed the warming influence had played its role; perhaps more so in its loss seeing how beet-red the man’s face turned.

“W-what’s with you?!” Stumbling and staggering, the man’s stuttered voice was some stride betwixt anger and that of lesser acknowledged addled mind, hinting of less tranquil conclusions in store.

“I’ve got some responsibilities that need attending pretty hurriedly. Do you think you could move?” That way the man blocked the alley’s breadth such that Hezran had no way of passing. Looking closer it was a familiar face, one that Hezran recognized from the gate. It seemed he was the only one that had the recollection, but even then he doubted retreat would have crossed either of their minds.

“What’s with that? Don’t fuck with me!” It must have been practised many a time, as though round and clumsy from undue influence the blow struck hard and strong enough to fracture bones. No doubt it was a point of pride for the man; perhaps the very last remaining remnant of greater days come passed that could be glimpsed through a once proud smile now twisted in cruel joy, however…

A crunching sound emanated from the overlap as their hands came to cross. Even in the past Hezran had faced countless fists more armed and practised than his own; now there should be no doubt. “Sorry, but I’m not really in a mood for posturing. More than like these are empty words, but I hope when you get up you’ll rethink things a little.” There was no turning back, lines had been crossed and their remains pissed in ashes. *Heavy…*nonetheless Hezran’s feral fist had never scraped lighter against the wind.

“Don’t fuck with—!!” For final words they were as little eloquent as any hope expected. Whether from nature or from bottle, the running of foul mouthing was cut short by the crushing of jaw to skull, both bloody in jarring and in splitting all at once. A fraction of anger pent too tight, with uncanny recoil the man’s body already weighted from his drink body flew far…and then some. It formed a beautiful arc amidst the empty space before crashing headfirst through a further concrete wall stripped bare behind.

*Ouch… I overdid it.* A jarring sensation left in his wrist, it might have been his intention to let the other sleep, but from the looks of it an extension to more permanent stay was now in doubt. Of bigger concern, however, was the unwinding length of cloth along his arm, shredded by the glint of steel that now sparkled high above. From looks it was a knife, as common as one might find by a dinner plate but cut with jags. Fortunately the blade’s path took it safely behind and its flight should end with serrated teeth sunk safely out of harm.

*If she were…* Needless say he would never have felt the end of it. The slight stinging cut left behind served a needed reminder of his fallacy in newfound strength’s reliance. If it were with her he would not have got away so lightly. Now that he was alone it would be up to him to get in line. He would never survive the truer perils left to cross if not; at least it was something to consider as futures passed…

*Wait*… *The path…* A cold whimper slunk around his shoulder. Turning his head he saw the girl still crouched, unmoving from her shell. Suddenly those harmless jaws dripped deadly in their singing flight, as if lusting for a final sheathe.

Lunging towards the shimmering glare, the reflecting mirror’s starlight proved too blinding to his eyes, a side-effect of new astuteness in the dark.

Should he grasp it? Reflex was on his side, even blinded he felt confident in its path… *No…* There was a pinch of wavering wind; that could be all it would take. *Not a chance!* Risking a life he could have saved—made doomed by his hand—he might as well throw it all away.

Unfurling the sail of his will into the air, protective as no longer was concealing, Hezran dove beneath its fragile, shielding breadth to cover the girl, frantic to pull her even a single measure out of path before the dice would fall; even knowing how by then time had already made its run.

A single line of heat scrapped against Hezran’s face, spilling tears into the sand. Grazed just inches from the girl’s former resting place, what was once made fatal turned merely pained…perhaps still fatal in mistake.

Beneath a tent of cloth the girl turned her face and there she saw it. In a moment’s instance spilling blood turned brown to scar and merged to white before growing a single condemning line of hair, unmistakably discoloured from the rest.

“Mmph…” Able to take only a single breath before she found her screams blocked by hand she bit back fierce against the binding finger, breaking skin and crunching bone.

Through the pain Hezran bore his teeth, sealing their silent gratings beneath his reddening lips. Pulling away would only frighten her, to strike or show his pain would only make it worse. Fear begets fear. Once calm, makes calm.

“Your name?” A quiet tone devoid of anger, of pain; along with a question less harmful than the rest. It seemed at least the girl understood a bit through doubt, letting her sinking fangs come loose a touch, though they remained still deep enough to stick. *Maybe some distance…*

But in that instant, to no one’s right surprise, she ran; no sounds, just the patter of feet. Rather the surprise lay in the direction of her takings, not away but towards the demon of her night.

Upon reaching the limper body, collapsed and unconscious against stone and just a bit bloody at the head, she broke down in a sob. “Oh…oh no…”

Hezran…he did not really understand, but at the same time he thought he might get at last a little of what feelings were being spouted. “Is it trouble?”

The girl wiped her face of tears, mixed pools blood and snot, dirt and soot. “Why did you do it? Why did you have to do it?”

“I couldn’t force my eyes. That’s all.” No matter what she had wanted. “Didn’t it hurt?” Of course it did, it had to have, but…

“There’s worse than that. There can always only be worse. As long as it was only me…” A jittered ramble, a flowing of perverse emotions stemmed of logic, of self-denial and protection. “I didn’t want this! No…there’s no way I wanted this…” Better than a demon, to her that drunken, beating man was more an angel, salvation—the only one she knew—if a fallen one at that. And for them at least she’d smile.

“How many are you?”

“There’s John, Jim; Bonnie and May; Nu and Katar, there’s many so many…”

“You were their oldest?”

“It was fine as long as he only used me. It had to be fine… As long as that the others only had to steal.”

“You could have died…so many times.”

“I wouldn’t. I couldn’t leave them alone. Even then it would’ve been fine as long as it was only me!”

He heard; he understood…still, there was no way he could accept. “That’s fine and well for you I suppose, but it’s not good enough.”

“What else is there?!” That was the truth of the matter. Around here this sort of thing and worse; they were all as nature. While prosperity attracts, it could only be spread so thin before those who swam its glitter became more reluctant to part ways.

Originally the slums were formed from searchers, those searching for fortune, for fame, and for wealth. They flocked in the droves hoping to make their mark and those who could not, either dead to dream or dead of hope, were oft too swift to resort to other means. Anything for the coin to slink away, return to a humbler, surer life; no thing was too much to give.

Here far away from the guiding pinnacle shadows freely lurked, however, “there’s always something else.” Wherever a shadow cast there must be some source of light, and strangle it be if he so had to.

“Move!” It was such a sudden change; Hezran had no time to show surprise as he was pushed around the corner.

There was the sound of marching and steel-toed boots; more than just the common rounds. Before even then she’d pulled his hand and her face once frightened, that had passed through both anger and mourning tears, had steeled with purpose.

He hadn’t thought it possible to see so many emotions flash upon one face; so real. *This girl…* It was more than just a show; each one took center stage and role. I may have been just in passing but the way she made believe…it was something his soul so dulled to feeling could never give Reivyn on his own.

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Waking Feelings

The crash resounded strongly below, not seconds after he had left.

In honesty Reivyn had already woke. When he slept, she slept; when he dreamt, she dreamt; his nightmares were hers.

Unlike the dreams of others for which she had too many, his…his felt all too real. The emotions too fresh and the cuts too deep, and yet all the more endearing. They paralyzed her.

She wanted to comfort him, stroke his worries by, just as he had always done for her… What could she do? What did she know that he had not already run a thousand times?

No… Instead she waited silently, stock still in bandaged cloths, hiding her own emotions deep away. By the time she dared leave her wrappings all that remained were scraps of sullen browns, shards of dirty earthen greys, and the darkening demises of drops of reds.

It was a scene of sordid sufferance painted worse by sunken mind, yet she knew far better. An itch of inference to her cheek and arm and the image was no more.

Even so she worried*…something…*something was coming. Watching the ever swifter swirling condensation of blacker clouds stranded far above grew a stronger dread so drowning, the beginnings’ of pelting stormdrops pouring down ringing of a neglected hazard remaining close at hand…

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Dragon Scales

*Splash…* It was cold.

“I think he needs one more.”

*Splash…* Cold water poured on a burning face still pounding from a blow.

“Maybe another?”

*Splash…* At first it was refreshing, but now the streams would threaten to take his health, if not his breath.

“Keep em’ coming.”

*Spl—*

“Sto—” But the water had already seeped up his nostrils and through the gasping cavity of his throat. Even his arm that went for grabbing succumbed to fit.

“Finally awake are you? “ The girl’s blade did not look like it would have taken lightly to the touch.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha…”

“You are the one who called it in?”

“T-that’s right. Where’s my payment?”

*Doesn’t even have the courtesy to state his name.* Well it didn’t matter; they had already found the traces. It was like throwing a steak before the wolves; but then that’s where dogs came from.

“G-great! With this much I should be able to refill the coffer… No; maybe I’ll have to build a cellar of my own, those runts will do…” He was so eager that he might have stumbled just thinking of the fumes, on feeling the swing of steel as a lighter padding fell to hand. “What is this?”

“Bills. I assume you recognize them?” White seeped into his face as dawned new materiality wrap around both his phantom and his limbs. “Bribery, coercion, assault… Enslavement in the form of foster-ship! …Even for a…”

That damn girl. He’d fed them; given them shelter when they had none. All he’d asked was for their bodies and their service. He’d even promised if their work came through he’d think to set them free; not that he had any plans on relinquishing. “Whole bitches! The lot of them!”

“Oh!” It struck a familiar tone. One shaved far too close to home. Something this other woman chose to sever with her own two meager hands.

“Wait!”

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Clouds

“A storm’s coming.” For now there was just a littering of stinging droplets but he felt it, he knew. Neither the message nor those dark clouds could be mistaken. “Was that alright?”

Dragging a half-limp body through the streets, at least that’s how it was supposed to be. In the end they’d left the man behind and Hezran’s regret only had grown deeper as they descended deeper into this den of liquid snickers, where bottles or bodies were strewn haphazard, broken by the wayside.

“Hey, why if it isn’t little Mai!” A tattered straw hat and barren feet bruised for lack of sandals; behind that friendly chuckle were sunken eyes and teeth so black as if to have none at all. A true merchant of death one might be mistaken if not for a sign declaring of the other sort. “And a new face!”

An equally browned and broken card displayed in wide-toothed grin: Cashstrapped Ends; and the showings were more than the common sort of kitchen tools even to the most imaginative of minds. “Sell much?”

“Booming bus’ness. Repeat custom’s more oft’n than not.”

“Chick’n or assist.” It was a twisted habit from the past: Whatever the tone or utterance Hezran would pick it up swift at that…a way of standing out just a little less lest be knocked down.

“Don’ know; not paid to tell. Can I do you a number at that? …though not seeing where the master ‘s…”

“Piss’d silly and too heavy to lift from dirt; though he’s sleeping like a beauty.” A touch forceful and not to the point, friend or not it was not something to discuss. “That being said thanks but no thanks. I’m not quite ready to visit that side yet. There are still a few more things to see how goes.”

“Well seeing the direction, thery’ll sure be worse to come.” A touch too cheerful at that, though maybe that’s what comes from solicitation for a business.

“Then I guess I’ll be waiting.”

“Is that so? Well let me know if you ever need a tool, I’m always more in stock—I’d offer a special discount for you.”

“I’ll keep it in mind.” Leaving the stall and its suspicious owner behind they caught a glint of steel from behind. Far from the first, the shimmer seemed ever closer. “Don’t you think they came too fast?”

“Perhaps they’d already sniffed you out.”

“Oi, oi, don’t you think it’s a little soon.” More like those back had already sniffed from tail; *I thought we’d have more time.* It made him nervous. From the girl’s mumblings they only had a short distance further, but something nagged him to head back. Just leaving Reivyn alone like that and now this…he couldn’t help feeling anxious, as if a fly buzzed knowingly beneath hidden folds of mind.

“Hmm…” However, even as his thoughts rushed on, impatient, smaller feet fell farther on behind. “Is something wrong?” A strange question considering recent happenings, but now was not the time.

“Did you mean it?”

“Huh?” Mean what?

“What you said back there.”

“Ah, that… More than you’d think. It hurts, but I’d never know for better if I let go early. That may not be enough for some people, but for me just that alone makes it worth clinging on.” That was his view on life and death, it did not necessarily matter if she felt the same; he just hoped that it might make her feel lighter, make her situation a bit easier to swallow and… “After all, dying is far too easy.” Something he knew only far too well. *Death: Considering it is what makes us human. Living on with it is what makes us people.*

“You’re an idiot.”

“Boy that’s harsh… Still, it’s more than soft enough.” Demeaning, with a kick, but not without feeling, it was the kind of response he could enjoy. “Now what are you waiting for? The clock’s only got so much more sand left. …You’ll need to say farewells.”

That girl…Mai, she did not even need to ask about what was hinted. Smart to know well enough; both sad and somewhat faltering she trudged back in step, rubbing wistfully against the new wisp-like chains that bound her ankles light as air.

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Different Reasons

As loud as the whistling winds’ whisperings were outside, closer by the sound was louder. Resting restrained to a chair next door, while his carer busily minded the fresh earned winnings of the day by the full moon’s light, something made Cull perk his ears. “So, old man, were you the one who let it slip?”

The sounds came from just next door: a door bashed and rushing footsteps, stopping all too soon for quiet.

“You knew?” The question lacked surprise, or even attention, its owner lost in papers.

“Heard whispers. Seems like their trying to keep it on the down low, but you know how things spread.”

“I’d rather not. It’s just some overeager ducklings and a monkey too strapped for coin to know what’s good for him I’d think.”

“And that was okay? To just let them have their way?”

“That’s not my obligation. I’m only watching. That was my promise.” Maybe Joe felt the oncoming of a sneeze, a sniffle escaping beneath as he rubbed his nose with wrist.

*Honestly,* Cull could not help but chuckle a bit, *it’s really heart-warming*. “Such dishonesty isn’t cute coming from an old man like you.”

“…”

“Seriously! Just what do they see in this pair—though I suppose there’s always worse.” Separated by the length between far corners, in the entire time they had been locked inside together, not once had either tried to close the distance. Their words were friendly and their actions calm, but to each other they could not be more at odds.

“Well then, this is getting a bit tiring…” Slipping his collar loose from around his neck, Cull stood free of his chair, his bindings noosed loosely about his by the arm. Rather the rope had always been so, whether purposed or not, or noticed or not: just pretending.

“I’m going to cop a look.” Punning to the end, Cull came to his feet above the hanging edge where bobbing heads of steel treaded just below; a black sheep stranded in their midst. “Watch the house for me won’t you *dear*?”

As Cull’s voice echoed back Joe did not even bother to tip his hat, merely sifting through his stocks and markings; as with other writings hidden deep within that caught his eye. “Sounds like trouble… Well, I suppose it doesn’t matter now.”

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Dragon’s Tongue

A marching line of steel had been his good fortune. Ere his arrival a force had already been assembled, and though Lodis might have complaint about the bearer, the opportunity could not have been riper for the taking. *Now if only the clouds would turn aside.*

“So, sirs…I trust you understand?” The putrid tones of burning brewery, from his right Lodis could hear muttered mumblings of disparaging complaint.

“You needn’t worry. I’ll personally see to it that your accomplishments be known. We would never have been able to move so quickly if not for your ample guidance. Now go, and pray we never hear of you again.” A slip of silver and that grubby smile lit up as flame, bowing deep to dirt before slinking off to darker ways; Lodis could hardly say he was sad to see the fuming spectre gone…*though at this rate how knows how much my word will worth, if anything.* Looking over his shoulder he saw tracking eyes, the situation less than ideal.

Storming into the sleep at night, they had caught not two, but one: the smaller heard but never seen. *What is she?* More thankful than ever for his adamance, he was glad he never let the others see, though his adjutant had necessarily caught a glimpse. And it was rather in her lack thereof reaction that Lodis found something strange. *There must be something more…*

“Sir?”

But for now that would have to wait, at least at face. “Spread out the search. The gates are locked and the river swamped, there is nowhere left to run.” With cheers of acknowledgement the soldiers quickly scattered, leaving only their captive and his own stay by his side. “Let us search as well.” He had a good feeling they would be able to reach it first.

Lodis had felt it for a while now: the tugging of the chains, the swerving of the eyes…it felt as if he were being guided. It was—discomforting—and he had every intention of treading carefully going on.

“Form up.” Their feet trod the barren, muddied path and the downpour dampened their dragging steps, keeping their minds strained and their bodies tense. There was no telling what flitting shadow might dare to lunge, when next those bloody claws would strike again to remove the next of kin of head. Snuggled tight around their prize, shoulders to shoulders and feet to feet; an inexplicable dread formed with the sound of passing water, as a sole silhouette’s appearance provided little reference for what was left to come.

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Washed of Vengeance

Sitting on a post overlooking the rushing waters now alone, Hezren watched the pulse and flow, swaying as it went. As torrid a torrent as it was, strangely enough watching the strangled stream soothed him solidly; even as it threatened to break its swollen bounds to swallow him whole. The sight was so absorbing he almost forgot his guests from patient waiting.

The sound of steel being unsheathed, they had arrived yet stayed still cautious. It seemed he would have to be the first to speak. “It’s good to see you all again—and you’ve brought some new faces I see. It’s too bad it couldn’t be a happier occasion…neither for you nor me.” They had taken something—something they should not have.

“Why don’t you show us what you really are?!”

“What I really am? Just a sad, sad human—your eyes haven’t fooled you—it was a terrible accident of sorts. What more could you possibly want to know?” One arm had already been seen plain as day, what more if not… “I see. So you’ve seen beneath the cloak.”

“Indeed I have, you monster.” Fiery and drawn, this did not seem like to end well.

“Now, now, even without meaning words hurt, oft more than a single stick or sling of stone. And in this case it seems that there’s come a rather frightening misunderstanding.” No point in hiding any further, the slit in the cloth already made the action easy enough to show. “You’re right to think I am the knight, but she’s not some fragile little princess nor some blindly barking lord…I certainly wouldn’t be very comfortable if our positions were reverse.”

A quake of earth erupted in their midst, echoing shots of blunting stone in a circle from within, as a small figure burst into the air and in the next instant come to stop on the other side, once solid cuffs slumping flaccidly in her wake.

Leaning beside him wantonly Hezran was more than quick to oblige by rub of hand. *I’m glad you’re safe.* And glad that she stayed waked. *If only I had been there…* Pointless thoughts.

“I suppose should have known, but even so she is a lady after all. I couldn’t bear to scar that pretty face.” As sudden and shocking as it hit, Lodis remained calm and focused, as if the entire strangeness left him unperturbed; enough to earn respect.

“As good of you to say, I think it best that you keep a safe distance. It’d be terrible if anything untoward came to pass…for either side.”

“You needn’t worry; I’d never even think to pick a fruit so far from ripe.”

What started as perturbing chuckles soon grew distraught, warm enmity passed through cold laughter echoed in-between; unfortunate that such peaceful exchange could hardly last. “I don’t suppose I could convince you to turn back with this.” It was a hollow suggestion; both knew it well.

“Afraid to test your blade.”

“Fair enough…but I suggest we leave the celebrations another time.” At the moment things were far worse; that was what she was telling him.

“And why, pray tell, should we be so accommodating?”

“Because, my dearest captain, trouble has its way of finding us; and it seems the kind to enjoy your company on the scene. I say this out of concern for you. I’m afraid your shaking ship might cut short of weathering the coming storm.”

“What could you possibly—“

In that very moment the dam came undone, succumbing beneath a tumultuous tide of ocean wall, consummated in waves taller than twelvefold most the shorter buildings heights—even the stone walls arched high above—the sheer crashing force shattering planks and sweeping walls… Fortunate there were no more screams be heard, only hopeful that it was not so less because of drowning.

“Honestly, if there’s one thing I am glad for is that you seem to take small threats in earnest. Bravo!” Hardly the word to describe the situation unfolding in front as a towering tube of water extended out in place; suspended and watching.

No sound spouted from the stunned of mouth, just the clang of falling steel; and disbelief. “Well, well, this is troublesome. A friend of yours.” Even now, Lodis proved ever the stoic, if sweating a bit at fore.

”You jest.” Topping that long scaling neck, scales of flowing water glimmering like crystal seas, upon its winged head pearls of midnight swirling in sync, searching until at last the found their prey. A mass of greater nature made incarnate. “Though I have no doubt in its purity there’s far too much debris so close at hand, and so your sparkyness I suggest you take your hands and leave; lest we all end up mere charcoal beneath more thundery waves.”

“And yourself.”

“I’m the heart of this, and someone’s got to take responsibility.”

“Fine words coming from that mouth, perhaps I should take you now.”

“You can’t do anything if you’re dead.”

Neither showing signs of backing down, Lodis finally raised his hand surrendered, to all but one’s relief. “Something tells me my life would have been easier if we’d never met.”

“Life’s always easier with less. I’m trusting you—better do a good job drawing that poster: make it nice and big…exaggerate it a bit. If someone’s going to take the fall they might as well do it with a bit of style.”

“True enough, on the majority your appearance is somewhat lacking. I’ll make sure to tell them to add an extra horn or two, and maybe some jagged teeth and slavish eyes.”

“More than one?”

“That’ll be up to you to see.”

One could only imagine… “I can hardly wait.”

“Well that’s if we don’t soon fish out your corpse.” A final, more ominous, farewell and one that Hezran had no intention of seeing true, despite the situation as was.

*A challenge it is…* Watching the sifting retreat play out from the corner of one eye, Hezran kept the other firmly planted on the leviathan’s rearing head already thinking, desperately, of the next move to be made. *Water is water; no matter how special it cannot guide itself. There must be a mind. The question is where is it?* If thing’s were as normal you might think the head, after all where better for the view or vantage, but that might exactly be the trap, where instead it hid somewhere more discreet.

*Head.*

And so it was. Trouble in itself, the crest was largest in its width and the water would exert a dulling force; reaching the depths was another matter altogether. On the other hand if it came to him—

If only they could be so fortunate. Although the heavy mass roared down towards, it stopped well short; instead letting go a streaming jet, enough to bore both rock and steel.

There was nowhere to run, the blast of fury wept far too wide, and yet even so Hezran was not afraid…neither of them were afraid.

The sky turned from dark to black, a barricade placed in view. It was harder than earth, more durable than metal, impenetrable and unbreakable; anchored in place by solid piercing nails and a steadfast embrace.

Even still the rushing water battered ferocious against their walls, shaking their bracings and splashing in around to wash against their soles. Any longer and the pushing current seemed like to pry them free…indeed there was something that had been pried and washed hard against Hezran’s soring arms. “Look what we’ve caught, a rat. And you were saying you had no magic to perform.”

“Ha-ha, haven’t you already proven it well yourself, though this… This definitely takes the cake.” That’s right, the mischievous little bunny fallen through, it was Cull. The situation only got more dangerous by the second. On the other hand…

“I’ll be borrowing this.” As the pulsing finally came to stop, Hezran grasped the dangling rope that Cull had brought still partly cuffed and clawed it free, taking two spare stones from the ground to tie its ends. “Since you’re here anyways you might as well make yourself useful. I’m not sure how this is going to end, so protect her for me will you. If one hair’s missing when I’m back I’ll take the rest from you,” *especially from herself.*

“I don’t know what you’re expecting of me—”

“Just do it.”

“…You’re serious about this aren’t you? Then you’d better make it through.”

“Oh, I’ll survive all right.” Now that Hezran had some peace of mind there was only one thing left to do. *I’m counting on you.* A whispering connection was all they needed; if the enemy wasn’t going to come to them he was just going to have to reach for it himself.

Hezran jumped and braced himself at the knees, waiting, but not to touch the ground. From below a tremendous claw rose to be his platform, launching him higher and faster than a speeding missile, targeted straight for the eyes. The trailing link behind him was quickly severed from the ground, far too short to tie him down. Instead Hezran extended the rope wide beyond his width, covering as much area as he could, so that as he would hit the water the weighted ends would not be slowed, trusting Reivyn’s aim to plunge him into the depths.

In an instantly, he was knocked of breath and his ears were dulled. Hezran’s head buzzed beneath a growing pressure as his vision grew increasingly hard of sight amidst a growing darkness. As he passed through the hydrous source his hurtle slowed to a chill, giving thought that perhaps he would not make it through the other side.

It was as such thoughts crossed through his mind that he finally hit it, something solid amidst the watery mass that burst like a bubble as like met like, blasting him to further heights—not before he managed to wrap his net around its core.

Hezran flew out into the air, dragging the smaller body along within his net. Up close he glimpsed a body of bubbly, bouncy flesh, with watery eyes and pudgy bulbs for nose and tail. Now that it was unsheathe the thing almost seemed cute to look, tiny flippers and all; even how it tried to ram him through on its rounded pair of horns.

Mercy did not cross his mind.

Hezran made one swift stroke for gutting, removing core from flesh. Perhaps in a final burst of clinging life the thing wept tears far larger than the usual sort, washing him away as a river in the sky; drowning him beneath the endless lengths below.

A fear had come to pass, but not the worst. He had fought for it and he was proud, however, those fragile claws of his failed but scoop beyond the surface as he sunk.

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Separated/Not Alone

“I’m back!” A familiar voice forced its way into the silent room, how it had gotten there in past the locked door was something for the person himself to know.

“Really. To be honest I’d expected you to make a run for it.” Even wished perhaps.

“That’s no way to treat your own travel buddy is it?” In a show of false friendship Cull wrapped an arm around Joe’s neck.

“I think you’ve gotten more impertinent since losing the ropes. Perhaps enough to pose a danger…” It was a threat less than idle, but in the situation hardly like to carry out, after all… “You’re not alone.”

Behind Cull was a dripping bit of cloth that edged in sullenly, staying near entrance as if ready to leap leave by the instant if not for a wary eye, now two…maybe even three. “Neither are you I see. How exactly did that happen?”

At Joe’s side, crouching to the crackling fire and rubbing her hands, was yet another shabby soul, equally as impatient in demeanor. Beside her were scraps torn paper and shattered clay having been strewn across the room, only for her to try to reassemble the pieces with her tender, reddened hands.

A quick glance and solemn sigh was all Joe would express to minor injury as he helped the pieces come connect in turn. “I suspect for largely the same reasons. …And I had thought it might be over with this.”

“Naïve. Too naïve, old man. It might seem simple just to get involved, but once started it’s all the harder to break free.”

“That’s one little piece of wisdom that I wasn’t hoping to hear from you.” Letting himself get goaded like that, it seemed that those three were not the only young ones in the room.

“It’s different if you’re not even trying.” The final, most hurtful blow.

“And I’d like to see you do any better!” Rubbing salt into ancient wounds still blooded, the yelp of pain was more rage than could be set aside; bodies lifted before arms. And just when it seemed like worse might come…

“Two grown men going at it like that. Why don’t the both of you just shut up!” A louder shriek built up from the shaking sides of smaller embers, the girl once lost lifting herself to the other’s side to wrap Reivyn’s shorter, shaking shoulders. “If you’re going to take to hurting each other do it away from your youngers, else…else I’ll never forgive you!” It was an empty threat surrounded by the sharper glint of nails, hinting at a cats clawing full of itch.

Even so, where there were hotter heads to add to heat, cooler minds washed their flames bygone. Things lost; changed…never been the same again. “I apologize. I let the boy get the best of me. …And he’s not exactly wrong.”

“And I’m really just half…” Where one expressed regret, the most the other would relinquish was a stouter pout. Still, it was hardly something that Cull was usually inclined to usually present himself. There was something about her way, a reminder of how truly frightening the fury of fairer sex known wrong; respectful and loving.

“That’s nothing to do with it. Rather than staying here to yell shouldn’t you two be working up some sort of plan as for what we’ll do next? I for one am not inclined to let that asshole just go and disappear just like this.” Foul words from a petty mouth less wanted in hearing than needed in speaking.

Beneath the stealing whistle of the cold night’s wind the girls’ tight embrace grew wetter, chiller by the moment and Joe was quick to cover, guide them back; coaxing a calm along the way. “That’s all fine and well, but the note.” Though he was inclined to follow the letter, it was another thing to get the subject to accept.

“Damn the note! He’s the one that got me into this mess.” She was the one angriest of all, burning on verge of tears. “I won’t let you…”

With sunken eyes and ears blocked from sound, Reivyn watched Mai from within the girl’s sticklike arms and felt more connection, more emotion from the simple, honest anger than all mutinous waves of feeling she had felt before. Was it through relationship, sincerity, similarity—she didn’t know? But this feeling of active seeking—the selfish wish to understand—it was something new and clear and most definitely all her own; a growing bud within her pre-full heart. Perhaps she was not alone…

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Guiding Smiles

“So why don’t you remind me. What exactly are we doing here?” Surrounded by a gaggle of giggling children chewing on remnant rinds of corn Lodis’s adjutant swung her own half-eaten cob in front of her captain’s nose.

“Orders from on top apparently.” It was strange enough to him, the one who had met in person.

“That’s funny last I heard she told us that we’d lose our heads lest we chase on up. No breaks, no stops.”

“Normally I’d agree, but she wasn’t the one to make the call.”

“You can’t—the Silver Knight…” If the princess sat at the head of the table, that helm of steadfast steel always looked on from behind, the only one let to have a sword at hand. Rumor had it there was someone/*something* even higher, shrouding even the very glitter of the chandeliers shone on high; however, mere rumors ended rumors, never glimpsing passed to the darkest shadows. But then again those same rumors had known to see whole towns disappear at once. “But why now?”

*Honestly, why now?* After all that happened they were so close Lodis could practically grasp that furry little arm. And now they were being relegated as escort to a bunch of, albeit impoverished and used, little children; though noble in purpose, hardly a knight’s normal day‘s work. While inherently more tasteful than that he had had of last, it’s not like there was any shortage of sordid youth or others that might guide them. The Council had certainly deemed never move their hand on it before. So, why?

“Well try not to think on it too much. After what went on last night I doubt we’ll be looking for anything more than corpses.” Kind words for a threat.

“Do you honestly think that?”

“That it would end so easily? Not a chance.” Or not until she’d had her way with them. Still for now at least she was all smiles, having common ground and kinder sense lend her darker winds to stow.

“For that at least I’m thankful…”

“Did you say something?”

“Not at all... Now why don’t we get them all to their new home? It’d be a shame to let them spend another night out in the cold.” For each one’s lengths of tears they would be given hope and warmth, a single dangling bead of color to serve remembrance of time and sacrifice made lost.

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Artist’s Conception

“That damn idealist.” The woman in red chewed her crimson nails. ”Why does he always have to get in my way?”

“Now, now, that’s no way to speak of family is it?”

“Father this, father that. He sure is selfish—what’s that grin?”

The two of them were alone at the table, all others been dismissed. After all they had done the search had been called off, warrants stripped in others’ favor. Surprisingly enough even *they* had made agree, and only from a single letter sent by bird.

“There’s nothing we can do. And though they said to call the search, that doesn’t mean we have to call the hunt.” A boyish snicker to his voice the man in the shadows dangled a paper by his strings. “An old friend of mine made it. I think it’s a pretty good drawing don’t you.”

“You’d wonder if he’s even human.”

“Don’t we all?”

On the poster’s picture was a face more devilish than ever been conceived, stroked of fear and…perhaps a little irony. Yet no one would mistake the devil whence it comes; less the smaller shadow by his feet.

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Tidal Carry

“Ugh…” Waking up awash the shore of a narrower strand of stream, the sun was already bright and dry above. So much that even amidst the chilling wind he felt his lips more cracked of parching than for cold.

Lying flat, his feelings were heavy, weighed down by copious amounts of salt and grit. More concerning was he that while from one eye he saw the fuzzy, orange floating globe above; the other was stanched of red. Foreign grains seared painfully with each blink and yet still fire showed no signs of quenching.

*Hopefully it’s nothing serious.* Given his drowning and all else, some damage would have hardly been surprising. Who knew; maybe the furry transplant had come to take his sight as well?

As his strength returned Hezran made to lift himself, arms still frosty at the joints, and as he did the worry slipped free from his face.

Following the sound of wooden wobbling he spotted a slate of brown, carved to fit a human face. Hezran picked it up half-risen, one elbow to the ground to support his lean. There were five holes: two wide up top for eyes, two small warms to show the nostrils, and a third wide enough to allow some semblance of sustenance to come through. Though not his own, it was not hard for even his untrained eye to see the accuracy and character of the mask. No doubt it would have fit magnificently for whomever it was meant—like a second skin.

*Clank!* He dropped the mask. The instant he had let his eyesight stray, he had seen a human corpse bobbing in the nearby stream held only by a single fragile branch. From the side he caught a glimpse that told of a feature critically missing, and now the mask turned over on the ground to replay the taint of red.

Dragging his legs to the edge of the stream, Hezran slowly cranked his knees to rise, stumbling more than once in taking up his feet. Once confident in his footing he grasping the other body’s legs, tugging as best he could the rigoured body up to shore. The fragile branch proved stronger than its look and the struggle harder than he thought but soon enough Hezran had fallen from the final tug that snapped his prize free.

On his back he saw the face beside him; or rather what face wasn’t there. That was not to say there were no holes and that they were not all entirely in the right place, but it was to say that was all there were. Where brows or beard might form there was simply nothing and all the skin right down to the non-existent lids was warped and twisted as if it had been melted off and plastered, nerves and veins branching across the barren face. It was how he imagined a ghoul, a horror of the night, but this one didn’t wake. Its arms were silent, permanent in rest.

*Who…or what, would do such a thing?* Even *they* would not be so pointlessly cruel! It was obvious from a look, this was not an act of god, nor some righteous calling—it was pure malice, cruelty intended for the sake of cruelty. For Ardent sake the man was not even allowed his pants, without a single strap to cover him from shoulder down to toe.

Enough to turn his stomach, Hezran spared no time to turn his sides away, touching the sticky-smooth grains of the blood-red hollows of the branding mask with closed eyes, listening to the calming bouts of stream.

The trees rustled in the distance first from wind than from something growing louder: the ghost of a carriage and the passing of pounds of feet… Who was it that had come for him, or maybe them?

“Hezran!” He remembered that youthful voice. It felt like it had been no time since they’d last parted.

“Cull! Over here!” Trying to guide the youth towards him, Hezran never thought he’d be so thankful to hear another, though suspicious that Cull’s would be the first.

“This way?” The sounds of movement could be heard from the underbrush as the leaves parted and they met again face-to-face, this time in the company of a real corpse. “What happened here?”

“Are you alone?” Where was Reivyn?

“Whoa, whoa, don’t worry! She’s not far. You know it’s hard for a cart to travel through the growth. I figured she’d be safer with them.”

*Them…*not just Joe, well as long as she was safe. And this gave him a chance “There’s something I’ve been want to ask you. How exactly did you find me?”

‘We-well you know…it wasn’t easy. It took a bit of luck.”

“Luck, huh…” Sure searching by the river’s flow might yield results, but what were the chances that you’d find someone lost to storm this easily—not even bitten by the wild or lost of change—before you’d see them dragged off to within some stranger’s house.

“A-and I mean your girl helped us along the way. Geez, it was practically as if she could sniff you out.”

*Geez…?*  But something bothered Hezran more besides Cull’s strange choice of words. “That’s strange.”

In the first place that should have been impossible, as Hezran knew well from when Reivyn had been lost to a deeper sleep. At the time he couldn’t feel anything where usually their connection was so strong. It had been as if their bond had been severed once for good. As long as they had not sunken to false sleep there were still tumultuous arrays of dream that could be felt, but with his state of drowning… It wasn’t hard to extrapolate.

There had to be something more. Luck wasn’t as simple as all that. In the first place luck was just the collusion between knowledge and circumstance. The more you knew and the more you knew of others, especially things you should not know, the better you could find your way.

It was just like a simple roll of dice. If you knew the dice was weighted or somehow otherwise predisposed to land on certain group of faces you could narrow your bet. Even further if you know the angle of the throw, the flow of the air, the strength exerted, etc. and etc. If you were somehow able to calculate all that you would be able to determine the fall of any die with perfect prediction. Your probability would be one-hundred percent and then well…nothing was a probability after all. Everything was just a sequence of certain events and how certain you saw it was simply a matter of how much you knew.

Following such a thesis it was reasonable to assume that there was something amiss, some method by which Hezran’s path had been determined. From the start everything had gone too smoothly: Fallen to ground where there just happened to be those sympathetic to his state; Chased from town only to find their path paved forward once again; Lost and found by the very same who kept them safe. Too much was coincidence, as scripted as a play.

“Really! Honestly!” Flustered as he was, Cull was not going to spill the beans. Hezran had no proof, just a mild itching, and no matter how he scratched the metal bug that latched within his ear refused to fall. “But really we should head back soon. I don’t like the look of this.”

“Is something wrong?”

“Well on our way here there wasn’t much, but the road showed traces of burning and seeing how the face is, um…melted like that, well…” Cull’s doubts were easy enough to see.

“C’mon then. There’s no time to waste.” Grabbing the mask of wood for keeping, Hezran made to follow Cull back to the others. Except when they got there all they saw was an empty road.

“Hmm, strange. They were just here…”

Indeed there were the tracks to show. They seemed to head off to the west, quite quickly at that given the deep engravings in the ground; with sets of few pinpricks that were following. “Dammit! Hurry!”

“W-what?!” To his credit Cull did try to keep up, but before long Hezran had left him out of sight.

There was screaming up ahead—a young girl’s scream; not Reivyn’s he knew that much, nonetheless… *Hurry!*

As he ran the road turned from simple stone to hellish scenery, a rampant pyromania of rock and debris. Beyond his blocked view the smell of sulfur tickled at his nose, along with that of burning flesh, once living sculptures so muddled by the flames as to be melded completely to their scrap. He had entered a world of art, elaborate and twisted in presentation, one of a sicker human mind’s description or one that lacked humanity yet at all.

It was there Hezran saw, at the end of the road, the worst of masterpieces in the making. The hunters were descending, spikes covered in glowing varnish from their shiny luster as barcodes and the numbers three and six scuttled with their octave legs. They were terrifying as larger creeps of nightmare, clipping and clawing as their tremendous stingers made dips and dabs.

“Run!!” Hezran did not know if his voice could reach, but his eyes already saw. From the horses’ neighs there was nothing to be done. Amidst the smoke and burning fire, blackened shards of glass and fiery splinters were the least to keep their prance in place.

They were caught like rats.

“Hungry are you!” Hezran shouted. He wasn’t fool enough to think himself the larger meal, nonetheless, Hezran threw charred blocks of something with everything he had, even as they scalded briefly in his hands. Over and over again he tossed the globs and pieces towards the rampant pair in an attempt to catch their ire, hoping. If they were smart enough to lay such traps, such mocking should not slip their eyes.

Beneath that sultry carapace glowing embers burned. They fed well. They would feed well today as well; not least a jeering human as it dared.

For a moment there was a clashing, clicking and clacking—nature’s language; its purist, barest form.

The next instant one zipped left and the other right. They would not forgive, but nor were they stupid enough to leave their prey get lose. No their blackish sheen had been stained far too dark for that.

One snip would take his torso; the other his head. Hezran was quick in darting back and forth through the fragile cover as it shattered with each dance, as he was cornered amidst the junk. One step, that was all the mistake it took as he slipped over one of the many fallen shards, barely transforming his failed movement into a dodge; a clear whistle echoing through his ears’ channels as the breeze above snipped through his highest hairs.

There was no breath to catch…no time to catch his breath. He had to move quickly, lest the next blow fell the rest. Fortunately it seemed the beast grew flustered with each stroke. It seemed to stop as its tail twitched above; however, less fortune lied in the glowing orange pillar that erupted from its spout.

What once was a piercing needle had opened up to form a cannon in its place, more than a rifle yet not enough for launching giant stones. The guzzling stream spared little; singeing Hezran’s coat aflame and burning single digits pitch as black, until they spread as ashes from the stump so no joint remained.

It was too intelligent for a beast, more than some humans Hezran had known and come to know. That was its strength… It was also its failing.

There was a moment of shock, impossible for the instinctual drive of a simple beast that bared its fangs till dead and more; reflecting a failing Hezran had too often known and as such knew all too well.

He did not wait to take the chance. Experience processed before knowledge took hold. Grasping the segment by his softer hand he jabbed straight with his right’s regeneration.

He could feel the tears spill from his eyes as his claws and wrist jarred against a surface harder than any insect he had ever known; for his efforts making at most crack, at worst prickling. In any case his blow was far from deadly.

In hindsight maybe the creature’s caution was born of confidence—the confidence that nothing could pierce its shell—and in it a trap to keep prey close. Whatever the case now the glowing muzzle had its target sighted at point-blank. There was nothing to stand between Hezran’s soon to be mangled head and one-thousand degrees of roasting, charcoal brazed.

“Great gobs of fire.” He could already see the spittle forming at the crotch. Running the distance to escape was too far and the mere heat of reckoning enough to smelt ice to iron, his eyes watering with its sting. *The heat…* An idea took form in Hezran’s mind.

That temperature. It was surprising enough that the barrel held. But what about the rest of the frame. Surely there should not have been the waste to cover the body whole, after all what are the chances that one’s ultimate weapon be turned in upon themselves, certainly not in an environment where they reigned king due to an out of nature evolution. His hands and claws might be too weak to pierce the steel’s hold…but what about bending.

It was a last ditch effort as Hezran clasped the tail between opposing hands. *Crunch! Crackle!* could be heard clearly from the joints, made weaker for the need of movement, as the slender lengths twisted about each other, folded tight as a clown’s hot air balloons. Soon enough there was a beautiful knot, just like a yuletide present, such that no matter how the present struggled its snippy claws could only glance the armor they so proudly foiled.

Realizing its fate, reneged to a ticking time-bomb, it chased him at the heels. It was fast but Hezran faster, especially now that he need only flee, and for his efforts, not long before the brush, a sparkling pillar of fire made a ferocious dying light.

Cremated to the core there was no need for cutting, simply ripping from the stem to watch the segments crumbled one-by-one within his grasp. Within the ashes Hezran caught glimpse the glow of a crystal stone falling to his hand, another core of memories.

An uncanny sound rang out amidst the wreckage—like nails meeting chalkboard, only several times worse. Looking towards the carriage he saw it encapsulated in a globe of blue that echoed waves of steam as the second beast took a final flaccid swing before dragging its third decider up from carbonized remains of rock.

Knowing the loss of its friend and seeing as it could not easily pierce the walls of water the creature was quick to flee. It knew when it was beat; still a warning flare or two were hardly wasted, one of which came Hezran’s way. It would have been easy to dodge, the aim being slightly off; however, there was a better thing to do than wasting. Hezran took at his knife and concentrated his will and energy into the tip the blade, a vibration forming in his palm at ready.

By know it was the third, and the first trying with something that was not at least partly solid; however, Hezran felt it would be fine seeing as how even water had seemed to vanish from thin air.

With a single stroke he opened a void, all-consuming, before the mighty raging of inferno. Holding with bared teeth, he felt the force straight through his arm, the heat kept just at bay, upon when the pressure finally passed both arms fell limp, one from sheer exhaustion and the other as excruciating nibbling creeped upwards in its wake. *Guess that was too much...*

“Ha! What…happened…?” It was at this point Cull finally managed to catch up, panting and out of breath, barely in time to see the last one flee.

“Trouble is what…” Hezran would have liked to cull the beasts for good and put their cores to rest, but it was more important that he stay. Rather, however they might chase, this was its home and not theirs, along with whatever other ambushes might lie along the path to its hiding hollow. *Pity…*

There was nothing he should do, they had their own problems and Hezran could only hope the animal took this fear to heart for other times.

Thankfully the orb around the carriage had yet to collapse and its cool wetness served well to douse his hands, the memories of their scalding still fresh at mind. It was Reivyn that had kept the water running till he cooled. *Thanks a lot.* Mere gratitude could never be enough. Thanks to her they had managed to protect and keep everything intact.

When the orb finally burst the carriage was revealed from the other side. It was fortunate that the stream had been dilated and thick enough to keep the outside’s happenings from within. Whether such stealth was necessary anymore Hezran still preferred to keep his trump card hidden for the time. “Are you all alright? No singes? No burns?” From all appearances the cart looked quite unscathed and though Joe was a little wide-eyed in his seat, he seemed to keep his wits.

“That was quite the thing… So, you came back in one piece? Those, *things*?”

“Gone. We chased them far away. Well, honestly, it was mostly from the rainfall—would you believe me if I said?”

“There weren’t any signs, but if that’s what you want to say I suppose it’s fine enough.”

“A true merchant. Trust makes value.”

“It’s not that simple…”

“No, it really is.” Hezran flipped a Knot on through the air watching in spin as it fell. It was a small thing more precious than its worth, but valuable none the less.

“Shouldn’t we get moving? It’d be a pain if they came back.” Cull had finally caught his breath it seemed, ready to move on to the next road that awaited as he clambered onto the back. “Hmm… Hez, your girl’s fallen asleep again.”

“Is it!?” If the past was anything to go on, Hezran could guess why. Reivyn had exerted herself quite strongly, but more than that her periods of mental rest seemed to imbue a greater understanding of the whole, like a computer’s update and reboot. Still, it’d be best he had a look.

“She’s fine.” Another young voice returned from the back, and looking Hezran found exactly who he’d expected.

“So it is like that.” Holding Reivyn’s head against her lap, Mai looked back with mild venom.

“Tch! It’s no fun if you’re like that.” Letting alone Cull’s side remarks and the painful bump now swelled upon his head, the anger in Mai’s gaze showed no signs of wavering.

“You gave too many hints. Besides, this isn’t exactly out of plan.” It looked like Hezran would have more explaining to do; but now was not the time. As Cull was so kind to have explained, one second’s waiting was another second’s loss, and with each sush span there was no telling what might catch up. Even then a lingering sternness was not lost on him as he came to seat at front.

“I can’t say I approve, getting such a youngster involved in your affairs, though I will admit at least it’s pleasant to see them bond.”

“They’ve been good?”

“Far better than without, though you might not like the things that spoke.”

Hezran could imagine. It was precisely what he wanted. His was one view enough, and at the same time one to many. He had felt, and hoped, that having Mai there would provide another—one relatable and more natural—to overlap.

“Ah, that’s right.” Hezran had kept it on his body, but it was of no use to him, not like this; and if it was really as suspected and the off-white powder left to fill his cartridges in the past were sourced as thought, he thought the stones were better off unused. “Here. Give it to her when she wakes up will you. It’s something she cherishes.”

“Then why don’t you give it to her. She’d be happier.” It was probably true, however…this was better; it’d prove the contrast to those ghosts that dwelled inside.

Even with her words Mai caught the glint of color passing in-between. For a moment she just stared, took in the palm-sized, fiery sun pulsing in her grasp and tracing the glints of blackness that pulsed as living veins, their rhythm unmistakeable; at the end returned secure to her pocket, a bind of cloth knotted at the top.

“It’s in your safekeeping now. I better not see any tears when she wakes up.”

“I’m not like you!”

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Forbidden Practicality

A high-pitched screech resounded in the forest, beneath the nurse’s needle trembling beast of black, jerking as the cure flowed.

“Are you sure this is alright?” At this point even she was getting nervous, Lodis hadn’t allowed any others come along to watch, but his actions…it would be no surprise if they were taken as high treason by the faith.

“I’m not doing this to hurt it. It’s just a numbing—temporary! Something to keep those destructive impulses far at bay; at least a while. Besides as long as it’s up and running at the end of the day how will they know the difference. No, I’m just poking around a little…”

“So you say, but from the wounded’s notes there was not just one, but two.” What if the other crawled up behind and incinerated them in a blaze of vengeance before a single utterance. The mere thought was hot enough to be cold.

“That’s the funny thing isn’t it? But we can’t go searching days for something that isn’t there. Did you see the crater? My guess it’s long gone, to the other side.”

Funny, she didn’t know if that’s what she would call it, though at least Lodis seemed confident enough. “Who would do such a thing?”

“Oh, I think you know as well as I—there are the tracks to prove it. …Say, do we have any orders left as yet.”

“No, strangely enough; all cases seem to have been handled by other units already… I wonder if we’ve fallen out of favour.” In a way they had certainly failed their duties past, but hardly what was one supposed to do? “What should I tell the others? Are we returning?”

“The base camp is a fair distance and as long as we check in at the regular posts there should be no problems as such…” It was a bit of a habit, chewing his nail when deep in thought considering. “It’s decided! We head north.”

“Is that alright?”

“Think of it as a vacation if you will, it’s rare to see the winter snows in full. I hear they can be quite beautiful, especially with a warm drink at side. Unless you have another suggestion for the time?”

“Aye, captain.” It may have not been part of the show, but she was happy to oblige. It saved her the trouble of weeding him to course.

“Ugh…you’re giving me the shivers. I think I like that one even worse than sir.”

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The Dragon’s Rumble

“This isn’t looking good.” By now it was obvious enough for all to tell the signs; the road to take had all but collapsed under the weight of mountains’ waking breathes. Had they gone straight on as first intended they would have caught the brunt and been buried beneath glaciers of snow and ice. Joe’s description was more than accurate enough. They wouldn’t be passing through this way any time soon.

Still, Hezran was amazed. Had he been alone he might have gone ahead to weather the fullest of the mountains’ rage. If he were lucky some errant traveler would have dug him up all iced or worse yet he would have been stuck eternally without melt for this region never seemed short of winter’s cold.

In honesty the winds had been picking up, and worries did spike even within his unknowing mind, but still the most seemed harmless. “How’d you know? Was it the snow?”

“It’s even easier. Hear that sound?” Cull pointed to his own ear that perked up towards the ranges’ peaks. Right now it was as small as whispering, but before they made camp it had been stronger; at its peak a howling roar as if a nether beast calling, starved for souls. “They say that when the range howls strongly those who dare to cross would fall victim to the overwhelming might of nature’s wrath. Stories would have it that once long, long ago there once lived a terrible beast of fire, a lizard that scorched the heavens with its fiery breath and from its nostrils spurted enough magma, soot, and dust to cover the stony earth and sink into the ocean—enough to form new land.”

“For somewhere once so warm, it sure doesn’t seem that way now.” Far the opposite, streams of decorated crystal flakes fell as if no end; even as they had come from just short of winter’s breaths where there had been chill but it was green. “Are you two okay back there?”

Now that the night’s fire had been doused they were back into the brunt, even the carriage’s woolen walls couldn’t keep the cold. Hezran didn’t need to look at the girls’ chilled faces or chattering teeth to tell. It was bad enough that buried beneath the mountains of furs and fabrics the vibrations of their shivers still shook visibly against the wood’s moving grains.

“She still hasn’t warmed up to you has she.”

“Seems not.” Hezran himself frantically rubbed his hands against his breath before inserting them back to pits. From what he’d heard the girl he’d saved unwanting said less of him, though worse when she said anything at all. At least it was promising that she was willing enough to use her skills honed by having sewn thousands of patches for tens of children and herself, in order to carve and paste new cloth on Hezran’s robe where once were only holes. If he hadn’t wanted any conflict, he wouldn’t have let her come along. “…Though I’d get the chills just looking at you.”

“This cold’s no concern for me… Well, no matter.” A single shrug, different from them Cull seemed nearly comfortable, as if at home. ”It may look like this now, but long ago, apparently, it was a near tropical abode, where countless ferns and trees littered these now barren mountainsides. Even farther up north and in height there was no want for food as the trees grew wild, heavy from their bearings of fruit and seed and nut. It was a land of plenty, of bounty…and yet no human dared to touch. They merely stared from the distance knowing, hungering and yet kept bay as the soaring watcher guarded its lonely gold, for occasion swooping down in want of more hearty meat. Once it had taken its fill it would sleep for a time and only then could those left take as much bounty as they wished. And like that the cycle continued, children were born, elders were fed and the children grew fat and old on the dragon’s fruit before its slumber ended and the trees were left to grow once more…over and over…”

Strangely it was not all that different from what was doing now. The space may be larger and the dragon turned to iron flesh, but all the same it flouted the sky, imperious, preying on those mindless, weakling sheep stranded far below. Except it never slept, its gears were always turning and the harvest always feeding, treading a circle in turn so each colony would spread its growth. If there was one difference it was that now the humans were the ones to grow as crop…and the same to harvest; that which left in place—one of those insatiable beasts, a Hand of Ard: a failed specimen, manufactured monstrosities left to feed even in the break.

“And the dragon itself?”

“That’s something left lost to time. For all we know one day it just up and disappeared. The story’s pages passed were burnt to crisp. There are few copies to begin with left, and you wouldn’t dare be caught with one. Despite this you would hear that every storyteller writes the same.”

That was a shame. Hezran would have liked to know the end. But he was even more curious as to who would go so far…and why? It seemed something of a children’s bedtime story; perhaps taken as a legend or myth at best. If they’d been willing to go so far there must be some inkling of truth; some message left unseen.

“There is another tale that follows: one where humans succumb to greed. Tired of mere fruit and other greens of earth they longed instead for meat…or maybe they were just tired of the constant sacrifice to keep their ruler sane. In the end they called their children, grandchildren, and greats if they had them. They tested them, gave them swords and weapon made in secret forges deep below the ground. When the dragon turned its eye they sharpened their steel and trained their might. For each generation that died the next grew stronger, more savage…until finally they’d raised a hero, a child to bear their sword and hatred; their lust for blood.”

“I can pretty much imagine what happens next.”

“So you’d think. Of course, the young hero set off full of purpose when next the dragon went to sleep. Their blade was a slight and sharp as crystal, both reflecting and passing the rays of sun; their muscles were firm and their mind was swift. Climbing to the devil’s roost it didn’t take long to spot it curled with tail onto head, snoring short bursts of flame like a dog in happy rest. Even in sleep it was a terrifying size; even larger in the mind. With each step the hero feared its wake and each crackle of straw and twig brought nightmares to their mind—but the dragon did not wake. Even when the blade slid between its scales to pierce the heart, it did not wake. Even with its trophy removed from chest its silence did not change. As its life’s vessel beat and tore its blood flowed evermore, filling the bowl and spilling far below. One variation would have it that this is where all other bestial life had its source; but that’s not the important part…rather what was left behind as the scales withered and the skin shrunk. When all that was left were bones, a cage of ribs; the hero saw it encaged, protected. A child of equal flesh, but smaller.”

“What to do?”

“The hero couldn’t bear to part another light. You see unlike some conceived intentions, this hero was a hero in their own true right. This tiny, fragile new life may have shared the form of the devil, but it had committed none of the devil’s deeds. Of course, there was no way the others would accept that. They would fear its growth as the formation of the next jaws of oblivion to absorb their many souls.

“For a time the hero and the young pup, let’s name Zeredius—more literally Z for end, though neither knew till point—for now were happy and made best of friends. While the others snored away, they would slip though the wild jungle making game of the hunt as much as hunting game. Full of belly, they’d lay beneath the starry sky and watch for comets passing by. They couldn’t have been happier.”

“Good for them, I would say. But these stories never simply end happy, do they?”

“One night Zeredius was no longer there.”

“Did it run away during the day?”

Cull shook his head. “The hero searched the entire night, both in the village and outside. Forgetting fear they called its name, over and over; they even shouted. So caught up they never noticed when the village’s snoring stopped.”

“The others found out? No doubt they held it captive, brought their hero there to trial. …Maybe even slayed Zeridius with the hero there to see.” It was a horror story. Hezran seethed with rage at just the thought.

“More than that. As their hero watched in shackles, they ate the dragon’s flesh, the flesh made of their own, and so…”

“And so…?”

“The hero became the devil in itself.”

“A rather gruesome story isn’t it. I take back my words. I don’t think I’d want this told by bedside even now.”

“Of course the latter parts would have been left out. I’d had to beg to get them and even then I didn’t learn the whole story until later on.” Which begged the question of where.

“I doubt you would have learned any of this just romping around down south?” It was not something Cull was eager to share; Hezran knew that much, but at this point he had to know.

“I didn’t tell you? It’s my home…one I hadn’t planned returning to; not so soon.”

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Tumbleweeds

“How are you feeling?” The boy felt a cooling touch against his throbbing cheek.

“…?”

“Ah, sorry. We don’t know each other do we?” It was a warm glance, a glance of real care; the first he’d seen in a while. “Us from down below need to look out for each other.”

“How…?”

“You’re joking, right? No one else gets such rough treatment, especially under the supervisor’s watch. Seriously, you’d think they’d get bored enough after the first few times… It just goes to show how twisted they are.” Within the other boy’s hand there was the sound of crunching metal matched by his face. “Ah, sorry…”

“No…it’s not like I don’t understand where you’re coming from…”

“Still, for all that you sure seem calm. Aren’t you even a bit thirsty?”

“Hmm…?” Hezran looked to his hand and the undrained can of drink it carried. “Oh, I must have forgotten; guess it doesn’t really matter. It’s…easy enough to forget.”

“If you say so…” It looked like the other boy wanted to say something, a suggestion perhaps, but on closer thought chose to bite his tongue. With a final sip there was nothing left, a practiced toss aimed for the gutter bringing their time completely to an end. “I have feeling we’ll see each other around. You can call me Hal.”

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Devil Grin

Hezran felt a nudging against is shoulder, waking him from more pleasant dreams. “What’n…mphh. Are we near?”

“Around the bend…” From the looks of it they were still well in the process of ascent. ”I thought you’d want to see.”

“What—it can’t be…” As clichéd as could be, Hezran’s face grew a deep shade of grey, shivering more from fear than cold.

It was there, high above, obscuring once beautiful azure skies. The black moon; the dragon. The harbinger of impending doom…

“Are you…smiling?”

Was he… Smiling, really… Perhaps he was. Unrealized to himself and more than just a touch eerie. Somehow he couldn’t help. The more he thought the harder it was to stop.

*A chance!* Cold sweat ran through Hezran’s veins.

He had finally understood. Hezran knew the truth of those few words, the slippings of hubris as had entrapped that vile king so long ago—and as of yet left unsaid.

If they were in his past—the past he knew—there would be a chance. She wouldn’t have to die. He wouldn’t have had to die. Even those lives that stained his hands this very day…he could save them. He would save them! Like the hands of time rewound on fate.

Was it right? He didn’t know. But wouldn’t it be more wrong now, knowing that something could be changed, to bow his head and pretend to blindness—even if something new was forced come to pass…even if something worse would come to pass…

Maybe all lines led to the same end; connecting, intersecting, passing back and forth infinite times until every gap was filled; but the path to get there if he could nudge it just a bit…maybe then it might even be possible to switch the track completely.

He couldn’t help but smile. He couldn’t help but laugh. An eerie devil howling at the moon.

“You know, this reminds me of the portrait I saw put up along the road. The Blackest Moon; or so the fug’ was called. At first I couldn’t make the link, but now I can sort of see it. That defiant, foreboding feeling—the kind you can’t wholly come to like but even so can’t help but be attracted…maybe they weren’t that far off with their imaginations after all.” If Cull’s telling’s were true someone up there certainly had a frightening sense of irony. It would have made Hezran angry any other time but for now… For now, he found it oddly suiting.

Hopefully… This time… A small glimmer of renewed hope.

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Smeared with Dirt

“Are you ready?”

“Ready as ever…”

“Come on. You need to stop shivering like that. Remember it’s only a simulation.”

“I know. I can’t… I just can’t stop shaking. Even if it’s fake the Idea of going there doing these kinds of things…” It might be better if he just killed himself right now, but even then that’d have no meaning. Whether he died or lived would have no bearings on the themes to come and though a shallow voice would be drowned out even a small stray strand of hypocritical kindness could be string enough to tug.

“That’s exactly why we need to do our best here. If we show our worth and prove ourselves, we’ll get our chance. We can make things…better…” Better…? There was only so much two leashed hounds could do alone. Then again approaching the coming lectures weighted down by iron was certainly something it would be better to avoid.

“Are we going to have a problem, *soldiers*?!” The bark of the iron rod prodding against their lame feet incited derisive laughter from most. As if they had needed the reminder. Even if they passed their time as cadets with blooming colours, they would never be called comrade by the ilk. Still…

“No, Sir!” Both of them proclaimed the same, the giggles growing louder seeing their salutes made awkward by bars placed at their knees.

“Your responses need some work! You’ll be cleaning up the course once were done—and there better not be a speck of dirt.”

*Aren’t we supposed to follow the schedule, old slave driver, sir…* In the first place the course itself was brown and if they dared to clean it white there would be more punishment waiting on the other side.

“And I’d better not see you not see any of you acting fidgety. Need I remind what happened to the last ‘Crawler that tried desert?”

“No, sir…”

“I can’t hear you!”

“No, sir!” They were left with one final dissatisfied snort, as the painful grind was left to rest.

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Homecoming

“Hail, travelers!” There was no gate or watch, but so soon as they passed underneath the solitary arch a voice called out warm greeting. “Don’t believe I’ve seen you all before. Not many bother coming out this way.”

Hezran had heard a bit about it long the way. This was a solitary little village confined to the depths of the snows. A sort of exile. Those who lived here either spoke too much when they shouldn’t, doubted too much of those demanded of respect, or knew too much for their own good. Not enough to earn them a place in the depths of the darkest dungeons, but enough to have them shipped off to a brand new life—harsh, isolated, but not unbearable.

“I come bearing goods, as well as a few who came to visit.” Joe offered to show what was in his cart behind, but their greeter seemed more curious about his latter words.

“That’s funny. You don’t look like the usual knights and they don’t seem the usual prisoners.”

“It couldn’t be helped. A friend of a friend of ours should be living here nearby. I don’t have a name, but just a letter. Darren’s the one who sent us.” Hezran tried to brush it off, however, the woman knew far too better from her time.

“You wouldn’t have been the first to run here in hope of hiding from a troubled past, as we told the others we hardly have enough space as it is.”

“It seems to be rather wide…?”

“You’d think right, but with all the snow and melting, the earth tends to shift quite well. We’re fortunate that some migrators left long time before were generous to leave behind a strong foundation such that while most earth moves there’s a square of iron that’s always still. Even so we could probably build an extra house or two—have done, but every time not shortly after we get pestered by the noble law to shut them down. More oft than not they take the squatters back in chains.”

Made sense. The more moving gears that were left spinning out of strict control, the higher the likelihood of misshapen interlocking tearing the entire thing undone. Crime or no crime.

“But Darren you say… I’ll ask around. In the meanwhile you might as well do us both a service. If you’ve got extra food or clothes to stave the winter the people would be more than happy to trade. We’ve not got much coin to have around her, but of what little other remains of stagnant fortunes I’m sure you’ll find some more than happy to unload.”

That sounded about right. Still, there was one thing Hezran wanted to ask. “This might be strange of me. Do you feel any resentment?”

“I myself was born here. I’ve never known any different and though some others might complain, I just can’t get enough of this fresh cold air. The feeling of coming in beneath the blankets by a cozy fire after a day’s cold sweat—with a mug of cocoa in hand if I can afford—just can’t be beaten. I will say for the others, however, that even if they can’t learn to love the weather, they usually come around.”

*I wonder if that’s how she felt…* No, not felt, feels.

It was different coming from a place you had learned to know than being taken from a place you had barely had a chance of knowing. For all Hezran knew, his sister might have even found her new life pleasant, at least he hoped. That’s how it had seemed at least by the way she had told her stories. The one’s she’d tell for hours as he listened, up there in the sky.

“Then we’ll be taking you up on your offer.” Joe turned towards Hezran in the back. “Is that alright?”

“Of course. I’ll help as best I can.”

“See you—” Just as they made to part ways a slight tremor came from the back of the cart. It looked like someone had decided to play a prank as Cull had elbowed himself out of the shadows to rub a sore spot on his ass. “Is that who I think it is…? Cullen! Where the hell’ve you been! You’re father’s been dead worried about you all this time.”

The young man froze with a hiss. “Well you see… There was this and that… Anyways it’s not like he’d care an inch for his rebellious when he couldn’t spare a second for his fallen wife!”

“He isn’t like that.” A few crystal droplets could be seen pooling beneath the woman’s pale-golden hair.

“What would you know? You weren’t there when we got chased out. …And he had the nerve to come looking back.” Cullen’s tone softened a little in response, though still full of grievance as he looked away with shame.

“It’s been years! Years! And you think he wouldn’t cry a single tear. What about your brother?”

“…”

“You’ve got to… At least go see him, please.”

“Maybe…if I feel like it.”

“You’d better— No I can’t.” Dragging a slight piece of fabric from her collar she brought it up to her already frozen tears. “I apologize for the display. I’ll get going now, so I’d hope you do as I’ve said. And enjoy your stay, no matter how short it comes to be.”

“She seems rather sweet.”

“She’s just conniving…” If not from looking you’d think them mere harsh words, rather than a compliment of the highest order.

It really was too bad. If these were the depths of frost, she must have formed its beating heart that kept the village warm. So it was sad that if things were to stay as were, a final arctic breeze would stop the flow for good amidst a final blaze of fire.

It seemed a final transplant was the only hope; Hezran could only hope the organs wouldn’t be rejecting. But to where?

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The Strength of a Bond

Though the villagers had approached first with caution it seemed the word was quick to spread as, starting from a few curious children and then their less interested and more distrusting parents, it was not long before small crowd had formed.

Reivyn herself had stayed stashed to the side of the cart doing her best not to attract attention. Without words that could be spoken or an appearance that could be shown, the most she could do was write the few scribbled words that Mai had taught in secret—she didn’t really understand why, but it was not to say she wasn’t lonely with all eyes turned away from her. At least she was beginning to think.

*Hezran…* He really had too much on his mind. Maybe that’s why no one noticed, or even cared, when she had made to slip away.

“Reivyn!”

Was it him?

“Good, there you are. I thought I’d lost you.” No it wasn’t. Instead it was Mai who managed to find her first.

“I saw you leaving. You know it’s really cold this far out. Animals get hungry around this time.”

It made sense she supposed. Both he and Joe had their hands full dealing with the customers without Cull having run off, disappearing some time shortly in the past. It made sense, but it wasn’t what she wanted.

“Hey! Are you alright?”

She wasn’t alright. But this much at least she should handle. If only… *If only I was normal…*were the words that wrote with a stick beneath in snow.

Mai’s brow furrowed above the twisting of a half-turned smile. What was she supposed to say? She had already seen enough. She could say that it was alright to be a bit strange; that there was plenty of weirdness to go around. That would only make the consciousness more. It was better to move forward than to circle back. “Then why don’t we try right now. You can make the sounds can’t you? Ah…Ei…Ou… Follow after me.”

Reivyn opened her mouth as if to speak, but nothing came out; the voices in the darkness spoke their anger. The more she tried to gasp the sounds the louder they got, until they were all there was.

Blood… Hatred… Death… They wouldn’t forgive. They wouldn’t forget.

What was it that felt so warm and smooth beneath her claw and fangs? Rich with iron to satiate her thirst? Red.

Was what she was doing right? What would he think? The one who wouldn’t turn his head? *Ah, it doesn’t matter…*

“Reivyn!” His voice called out, leading her to wake. From her former crouch she came to on all fours, having pounced like a hungry beast as her prey lay beneath pretending not to feel as she held one arm heavily with the other sniffing up the pain.

*What have I done?* She had broken again. Broken their promise. It didn’t take long for her feet to try carrying her away, but even shorter a sturdy grasp took hold. And it wasn’t just one.

“Look at me!” A curse. A judgment. But then why couldn’t Reivyn feel any anger in that voice. ”Look at me. It isn’t as bad as all that,” said the girl with three deep lines bleeding from her arm. “I’ve had worse from the bites of mice and other tiny squabbles. So…why won’t you tell me more?”

--

A Breach of Friendship

“I heard there’d been trouble.” Helen had come to find them as dusk came to approach, though by that time they’d already managed to dig themselves a deeper sort of grave.

“Don’t worry it’s all sorted as of yet.”

“That’s not quite how it looks to me.” They must have certainly seemed quite the trio, fellows in being downcast. One from pain endured, another from pain inflicted, and the third from pain failed in prevention. But that wasn’t all it seemed. The most drooping of the heads seemed to be the girls and none of them seemed like to tell the cause.

“If you’d have some fresh bandages and alcohol to spare it could serve to make things better,” physically at least; that was Hezran’s hope.

Mai had refused to move an inch until they’d fed her words, by then her wound already begun to turn black and festered. It was only thanks to the frigid temperature keeping disease at bay that things hadn’t gotten any worse; however, the mental sores created… It would probably take more time for gravity to sink in.

“Normally I’d tell you your friend was better equipped to deal with this than I, but…” She wasn’t the type of person who could just stand by and watch as someone suffered, even a stranger. ”It’ll be a short detour but I hope you don’t mind if we make a stop by my villa first.”

*Reivyn, you can still move right.*

*…*

Moving her limbs wasn’t the question. It was her heart that was frozen in ice. As the closest thing she had to blood Hezran had a responsibility to show her the way out of that deepening ditch. That rather than wallowing pointlessly in an increasingly impossible hole of thought until the sky above deserted you, that one should climb the sinking tide with open arms—with a smile—even if it was one that could only be seen with evil. …But it was also a problem he had tried and failed to deal with yet himself.

Even slower was Mai, now without the will to seek recovery; more like to counter it. Left no choice Hezran scooped the wounded girl up in his arms to carry them to safety all the faster.

“What are you doing?” She had never liked him much before, but her venom had taken on an entirely different potency with the recent hours. And it wasn’t just for him.

“It’ll be faster this way. I don’t mind if you complain.” Pride only caused unnecessary hunger.

And so they began climbing, back to the village, back to the warmth of hearth. Their destination wasn’t far. As it turned out the first and the largest house they’d seen on entering was the lady’s home.

No time was spared to pad the floor. The drips of blood would stain, but neither could a life hope to be replaced.

“Help her out will you.” Hezran would have done it himself, but further pulses of animosity would serve no purpose to stem the flow. Besides Helen seemed to know her way, no doubt they hardly had a good clinic to spare in these far reaches, leaving everyone as doctors to their wounds. From the looks of it he would be more surprised if she wouldn’t do it better.

Hezran pulled him and Reivyn past the doorway, out of sight. It would be better if they didn’t speak, for now. Better to just let Mai drift off amidst the fire’s cradling embers. It was something they would need to deal with, but better off not yet.

Helen had only needed a fleeting look for an understanding to pass. “If go to the end of the village along the cliff you’ll find the man for which you search. His is a small cabin overlooking the ravine.”

He nodded briefly. He didn’t need a map. Hezran already knew the place and felt cold how clearly the lines of fate had been drawn him back to his remembrance.

*Let’s give her some space, okay?* But Reivyn refused to move. Seeing that Mai was now asleep she moved back towards the fireplace. *Will you be alright?*

*…*

*Just promise me you won’t let origins define you. People are not that simple—nothing is.* Even the pebble sitting on the shore would be reshaped by the winds and rain. Not that he hadn’t been the first to fall for that petty trap. But people learn.

As reluctant as Hezran was to leave them two alone, some risks were meant to be taken, small and large, or else one’s soul would never grow. Even though through situations that were forced upon them.

Taking his leave he could already smell the scent of burning chocolate off the kindled stove. It seemed like things would be just fine. He could only hope, with any luck, that his small time away would heal, as that was all that would be afforded to them, as Hezran trudged on through the cold and biting snow all on his own.

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Making Trails

“*Brrrr…* They’d really come out here. Look! The path is absolutely covered.”

“Well, according to this there should be a second path that bypasses up half-way. But if that one’s closed off too…”

“Are you joking with me? After coming this far?”

“I don’t like it either, but unless you suddenly sprout wings to float us over there’s not much we can do, and that’s if they wouldn’t freeze as well.

“How do people even live up here?”

“Not by choice. But I think you’d find after a while, you’re not one to fear the winter. At least I’d hope.”

“If they hadn’t wanted things that way they shouldn’t have stepped themselves out of line.”

“You’re a true model. Perhaps it is I who should be saying the sirs. …Sometimes there are things that require one to stray a time.”

“I can’t agree with that.”

“Then I think you’ve simply lacked enough experiences.”

--

Rogue Kindness

Walking to the edge of the village Hezran saw the hanging cliffs after which the place was so named. Looking down from the giant’s step plateau the drop seemed to go on forever only to end with tiny pricks of green surfacing shallowly above the darkness.

That last short stretch of a hundred meters seemed like miles to his dragging legs, chained down by the remembrance of that day even as the sky grew darker, clear of stars. And when he finally got to the door Hezran stopped stock silent, full of trepidation.

Was it really alright for him to be here, trespassing on the very grounds stained red by his impurity? It may have been something that had yet to, still may never to come to, occur in this present’s future, but to him it was already part of his cemented past; and thus this world’s.

It was hard to bring himself to knock the door or even reach for the half-twisted knob centered in its midst. But time waits for no one; even as he waited the flakes around him continued falling, with different colours and different shapes. And soon enough the gap began to creak inundating him with the face of his older sin; also freeing him from the peril of waiting indecisiveness.

The face that greeted him was more familiar than he possibly could have imagined in the past… He had never bothered to see their faces—rather he consciously made avoidance. In hindsight perhaps he should have expected it, for one known to doubt so much. “Wha—“

“Shhh… Quiet… My brother’s sleeping.” It was an unusual situation. Their roles as usual stood reverse. “The man of the house hasn’t come back quite yet, but if you want some water feel free to help yourself.”

A wooden jug was placed on the table away from a silent kettle no doubt long since cold. Pouring a cup, the near-freezing liquid seemed as chilled as would be pleasant on a hot summer day, but Hezran didn’t mind. Sneaking after the fleeing Cull, Hezran found two bodies in a larger room that held three beds: two fresh made and one messily occupied by a boy not yet having reached his teens.

The older brother sat on stool by the bedside wringing a piece of folded parchment in his hands. It looked like they still had yet to meet. “Seriously…he didn’t even bother changing the lock…”

*And you still insist on stealing into your own home…* Which was more pitiful? Both still clearly had the other plain in mind.

At the very least that smile wouldn’t be mistaken. One in sleep and the other watching over. Though the sight ended all too soon with the coming sound of shuffling at the front.

Cull didn’t move from his seat. Hezran couldn’t help but wonder what would happen if they met: a turning of face with scowl, combative words, maybe a reluctant hug. …From the looks of it it was too soon.

Still, Hezran could only imagine the reaction of someone coming home to find a stranger in their house alone, especially with his stranger hands and so near their child’s rest. Hopefully, the poor man would have already been told, but in any case it’d be better to meet at front than in back.

So, having come back to sit at front, it wasn’t entirely expected that he Hezran would be facing down a barrel so far north and quite so soon. “Who are you?”

“I was let in.” Hezran inched his head towards the bedroom, wondering if it would be enough to understand. That he didn’t feel a lead pellet sink into his gut was hope enough.

By the time they turned around the corner the still warm stool was already empty and the window cleared and opened with its curtains billowed by the winds, a silent letter resting on the tableside.

*Leaving me out to dry…* It looked like him and Cull would need to have a talking too once this was done. Still, the notion was enough.

Creeping over to the freezing gap the man put down his musket to draw the curtains closed. “That damn idiot… As if a single letter would be well enough.” Just as the son once left the father took his seat to tousle the tangled hair of his younger son.

*You seem to be crying plenty yourself…*

“So…did he say anything?”

“I’m sure you can imagine. He’s still dragged down, unable to forgive—just as much as you. Does he come back often?”

“This wouldn’t be the first.” From the cabinet beside the man pulled out a drawer, before placing the newly smoothed notes amidst a bed of paper flowers.

“Can I ask?”

“You might…but it’s best we take this somewhere else.” Adults and children alike often had equal trouble in keeping their emotions checked.

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A Scene Thought Out

Cull remembered that night just as clearly now. The same cold wind. The same empty moon. The same clear sense of loneliness, of preoccupation with a burden far too much for his still yet young and shallow shoulders to carry in its whole.

Cast out to the streets in the midst of night with only a cart to keep his bedridden mother and the young toddler she refused release from the sniffling snow, a single darling ticket to their name. The ticket wasn neither golden, nor even crusty brown, but rather a deep, dark grey, as much as the iron bars of the carriage and the gauntlets that guided them unshaken.

Not one soul dared come out to see their passing, watching fearful from the windows with dying candles, as short of fuse as the amount of time by which they hoped their lives would be rid of the fatal disease.

It had happened so suddenly. Their mother had always been the most lively and most caring of them all. When either of her boys came down with a fever or a cold she was the first to wrap them warm and douse their heads. And then she’d search for the freshest herbs and roots herself—she was an apothecary who knew her cures well.

It happened on one such day as she came back, their once welcoming neighbours’ nannying the two from sickness, that she was found on the doorstep full of cuts and bruises and redder skin than them. Clutching tender strands of green she had collapsed beneath the arch without a second sound.

At the time more worry than fuss the people feared little as they lifted her to rest beside her sons. They knew enough her teachings to boil the leaves of green just enough to let the liquid turn but not so much as dyed. Pouring the water to cups and to cloths all three were made to drink and for a time complexion seemed to brighten.

The boys were first to wake and were greeted well with smiles and light sweets to calm their stomachs. The mother took her time, but, they reasoned, she had been last to fall. It was only after a half-week notice that they’d thought to send the letters.

One was sent to the east where their father cast his work, so much they hardly ever saw his face. They had heard stories of him building new abodes and he was as fantastic a carpenter as they come.

The other…to a place they refused to tell, except for the glimpse of a starlit seal. As much as insisted nothing of consequence it was hard for even them, even young as they were, to fail noticing the change in gaze; how their carers began to sift away.

By the time there father late arrived, red skin had begun to purple and minute waking spells returned more shortened. Through the fits of coughing she’d beckoned him closer and whispered him to shoo the kids away. Then they shut the door. Secret whispers slithered through the gaps, hints of warmth of fragile love and a care that hid beneath a shaking anger; but nothing of the words, till they lulled into their deeper dreams.

When next they woke to sound their father had vanished, nowhere to be found. Abandoned. Instead the door was broken down and several pairs of feet rushed in with torches. The villagers, the fellows she’d so helped time over time again, had sold her out.

After so long you’d think their worries passed, but human fear is a frightful thing, full of persecution. No hands were offered, just a solid slab of wood and a pair of barked commands. Even on their own their presence would not be forgiven, not so much as to cast them place among the unworthy in distant quarantine. Strange yet that the people there be so much warmer.

A place had been prepared before them. And though rough as long as he worked his tiny share they had the food to eat. The frigid air even seemed to turn their mother better…for a time. But even slowly the poison spread grasping tighter at her weakly beating heart…until one morning they woke to nothing.

And then he’d had the nerve; the bile and the gall. To show his face again! Bottle in hand and cheer on his face. Even if he weren’t so late…

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A Telling Tale

“You could imagine he wasn’t happy when I appeared. After all that time away anyone would think I didn’t care. …And maybe I didn’t care enough. At least I should have bowed my head given another chance. I always seem to be one step too late.” Right now they were sitting right near where the scene had taken place, a hollow imprint in the floorboards serving as reminder. “The very first thing he shouted at me and then came at me with his fists. You see that bottle, it might have looked like liquor, but it was actually a potent medicine in disguise.”

“Darren made it?”

“Yes. That night when we spoke behind closed doors. She demanded that I leave, not out of hatred or lack of love, but because the others hadn’t known that I’d arrived. It’s the last thing I would have wanted and I would never have left her side if not for a vial and a fleeting spark of hope. If there was anyone that might be able to create an antidote it would have been him.”

“But you didn’t make it in time.”

“I came as fast I could. The road there was easy enough, but the waiting took its toll. I was impatient. What I would’ve wanted in hours, even seconds if it could, took more than weeks. By then Darren likely already knew it was too late—so he tried to tell me though I refused to listen. It only made me rush headlong not carrying to take some glances at the side. It’s too bad I didn’t. If I had I might have cared to notice. It’s as if I were rushing along wrapped up in giant barcode briefs.”

It was an imaginative way of putting it, but more astute than many people would care to notice going about their ordinary, sheltered, daily lives.

“In the end I was almost caught. Normally it wouldn’t have been bad either, it would have certainly speeded me along the way. If only they would’ve allowed me to take my belongings I would have stayed instead of taking the leap.” Kale lifted up his shirt to show the scar, a large gash up his stomach to his chest. “I couldn’t have counted myself as anything other than fortunate to have made it after that. But the delay it cost would weigh on my family ever since. In the end the only thing I had to show Age for my efforts was the reddening on my cheek.”

And that’s when Cullen left. Honestly the one who fared the hardest was no doubt the youngest one. First he lost his mother, than his father, and then his brother was replaced, but still he smiled. That small smile amidst the storm of hearts was probably what kept them all connected. It kept the father from drowning in his bottle and the brother sending words that would connect. All in turn they hoped to keep him smiling. Though they’d never say, that was the only thing they had agreed on since.

“Alone it would’ve been too much. Helen’s been a huge help along the way.”

*Like son like father, huh.* Though the latter was far less obvious about it, more conscious of betrayal.

“It must have been hard. I can’t claim to have felt the same, but at least I know what it’s like to have lost family. Unfortunately, I don’t have the luxury of making up any longer,” *so you should while you still have the chance.*

From the sounds of it the man already knew. Maybe he just needed someone else to give him the chance to say it. “I’m sorry. Do you think you can wait a night?”

“I’m sure something could be arranged. Do you know where he would’ve went?”

“Not for certain, but I have an idea. Though Age might like to try to keep their secrets, he’s still a pretty open book. …Or maybe that’s an act on purpose. Now, there’s a scary thought.”

“Good to hear. I’ll give you some room. When you get things sorted out we’ll have to have a celebration. I’m sure she’d be more than willing to help us out.” Hezran took a brief glace at the last silvers of quicksilver fading in the sky. “It’s best that you get it done tonight. Who knows how many more we still have left.”

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In Passing

It’s an awkward moment when two parties, friend and foe, meet each other at the door, both starved and cold such that they’d sooner sit together for a hearty meal than take knifes to eachother’s throats. Still, for every precedence there was always an exception, and this was one of those times

The knight captain and his mark took a brief nod at the door before entering to scoop their boots of snow; perhaps as incredulous were the ones inside as to the young woman left behind. “One last meal.”

“I’d really hope you’d spare me a few more.”

“Pray tell why?”

“A few more and whether you’re here or not I’m sure it’d hardly mater.”

“And more than a few would have your head for that. Perhaps I should take it now and save them the trouble.”

“There are worse things for one’s health than losing a head, or two.”

“Two…?” Apparently, the knight-in-training was quite innocent for all her thirst.

“I’d appreciate it if you stopped the foul language in my house. The poor girls’ just got to sleep and I’d rather keep the devil’s whispers from their ears.” As her visitors stood full-cloaked by the entrance with hands towards their pockets Helen would have nothing of it. “So. Were you able to meet?”

“Yes, quite early, thank you.” Hezran took the warm towel offered to rub the nips of frost away.

“Conspiracy?” That would be the first thing Lodis called.

“Nothing of the sort. It’s just that some know us better than others. In general, I’d say here they seem to *know* a lot less.” Not even the common papers reached so far north and similarly their prejudice seemed dulled from persecution.

“Even so I doubt you’ve told them the whole of it, have you?”

“Not yet, but soon will be that moment. There’ll be no returning past the point.” They were running out of time and at the end their place to run had been another grave. Hezran would need more than his own disposal to make sure the frozen dirt remained unscorched; too shallow to hold bodies.

But first what was he going to do about these two interlopers here. It was enough work convincing the unconvinced, let alone those who would be duty-bound against him. His counter-knight seemed the thinking sort and though the unmistakable glint of hatred had not completely dulled it had clouded somewhat since they’d first met. The bigger worry was the girl beside him. She seemed dead set in her ways, piercing eyes kept open with an unfaltering grip on her steel-hardened senses.

“Would someone mind explaining to me what’s going on?” That and the lady of the house, she had the right to know more about the circumstances surrounding those she housed, but Hezran would have preferred to keep to better terms.

“Well—“

“We are knights sent by the Ancestral Council sent to capture this criminal!” Perhaps waiting so long was the mistake—the pot had already boiled over and Hezran was left to merely scratch his head.

“Oi, oi… Aren’t you saying it a little too boldly?” Even Lodis had a sort of wry half-smile taking up his face. He would have likely preferred a more calming resolution. What was said was said—though not their place to say—was not untruthful.

“Is that so?”

There was no point in keeping a secret now. “So I have been branded, and from what I’ve heard there’s a rather fantastic poster for the showing.”

“Really, I’d love to see it some time.” From beyond the curtain a sharp-tuned whistle called her back. “But this talk can wait. As long as we’re all still civilized inside, I take it you’ll have at least a drink.”

“Isn’t your reaction rather lackluster madam!? I’d have you know—“

“Well you can hardly blame them my dear Elsie, to the best of them we seem like callous arbiters, though you’d expect for most that their life-held beliefs would still be quite hard to shake.” And for the worst the Ardent symbol stood for an ultimate injustice, one that had shattered their lives and left them sequestered to the depths of a frozen hell.

“I thought I told you not to call me by that name, *captain*.” Those were no innocent eyes that cast their gaze. Was it the act of measured disturbance or the single word that sparked her rage? Even more so now, those bare feelings seemed like a rough-hewn sword as prone to slice the hands that held them as the victim of its pointed edge.

“Why? I think it’s rather cute. Elsenlied is much too much a mouthful in any case.” Hezran wondered if the knight noticed. No it must be so, if there was one thing Hezran had learned through their meetings was that the man was not nearly the fool he played to be.

Then…w*hy?* Why keep her so close? Why provoke her so? What exactly was their relationship to him?

“Is something wrong?”

“Nothing of the sort. I was just thinking how interesting a combo you two make. Are you sure you’ll be alright?” Hezran could perhaps afford this much.

“Never better. Why ask?”

“I was just thinking how sordid it would be without you around to chase us. We missed you terribly for a while, though you’ve more than made up on this occasion. You couldn’t have picked a better time.”

“Meaning…” It was true that their encounters thus far hadn’t exactly laid pleasant on Lodis’ mind. “You’ve been going on about timing for a while now. What exactly do you mean?”

“For that—it’s best we take this back outside.”

“Now that’s a suggestion. You’d be willing to go back out there, when we just came in?”

“While I’m less against the frigid cold, the air will make my message crisper.”

As if on cue a gasp of cold swept in from outside as two newcomers made their entrance, closer than before albeit with their shoulders arched away. Both Cull and Kale had faces stoked red from more than freezing, though neither seemed quite so foul of mood as they would like express.

Noticing the crowd that gathered inside, Cull’s façade slipped. “Did we miss something?”

“You’re just in time. There is something I’ve been meaning to tell everyone. But first us three will step out a moment.”

“Out there? Didn’t you just come in?” Cull remembered those faces, clearly worried about leaving Hezran alone.

“Trust me.” Holding the door, Hezran allowed Lodis and Elsenlied to exit first. “Plus, I don’t exactly envy you being stuck inside right now.”

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One Person

“I believe that should be your last cup, Sir.” Across the narrow counter the tender wiped a precious glass round with cloth, careful not to smudge the edges so his wares retained a sparkling sheen, all other customers long since left.

The dimming firelight cast a long, long shadow across the counter’s length—longer still once it reached its sullen sleeper’s face. That furrowed brow was old and grizzled, but under the dulling candlelight it seemingly infinitely more so, like that of an ancient, leathered mummy dragged out beneath the parching surface sun after a centuries’ sleep beneath the sands—wishing for an eternal moment’s peace to ignore the world and everything going on around it.

The man tilted his comfort at a tender angle. Whether he was being shooed from strife or lifted by an eternal, caring shoulder it didn’t matter. The smell of alcohol tingling at his nose would be his only companion for a night such as this, his sunken stare sinking steady through his amber looking glass—fixed completely and straight through to the other side of that creaking, square-framed, snow-swept window that stood between him and the freezing cold where a pair of stray silhouettes briefly streaked across the shadows on a screeching, silent night such as this.

“Pour me another, master. And let me keep the glass.” The sound of cast metal rang across thick pine. “Now, I suppose I should go get warm…”

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Starcross

In opposing hands were each a piece of frozen steel, one arm’s length and the other thinner than the width that held it. Even now with sluggish, whitening joints the sparks clashed to earn reprieve.

Against the scattered starlight Hezran traced a solitary nail through the pointed lights, following their dims and resurfacings beyond the scales of the shadow moon’s ebbs and flows, ever slower, silent and creeping; unsuspected. “What do you think when you look at tonight’s sky?”

“It is a touch strange, but not unusual. The second moon has always floated about as is, a permanent sunspot, sometimes starspot, in our skies.” Lodis’s was the view of a pragmatist—one not to believe in luck or guidance and nonetheless prone to ignoring the much simpler answers left unshown. “Though I suppose it is sort of odd how much sorrow seems to following its wake.”

“You lack romanticism.” Hezran was sure the same would have been said of himself if positions had been reversed.

“You have to admit there is a sort of romanticism in believing the most convenient truth until proof proves till its end. And there is beauty to be found there as well.”

Hezran shook his head. It seemed the man would claim to play the fool to the end. But it hardly mattered. There was another equally simplistic solution Hezran was looking for. One of more mystical nature, more demanding of faith. If Lodis remained unwilling to provide, Hezran was sure there were others that might supply.

“It’s the Ardent’s judging eye…” The subordinate espoused the common view. That was how they were taught to think down here. As if on the invisible side of some solitary floating rock laid a tremendous god of thunder unleashing jagged bolts unto the ground. Simple, fearful, and controlling.

“In reality it’s nothing as strange. It’d be better you thought of it as simply another piece of floating rock; another floating continent and a smaller one at that. A place where, just as here, countless fragile little humans beat away their living from an elevated point of view. One where the world below them seems so small. One where they’ve been imbued with a fragile little power, but enough of a difference to play at god.”

“And… Don’t you think the story’s comes a little far afield?” That nothing strange was strange enough a thought, along with the breathless string of words, left Hezran vulnerable to Lodis’s riposte.

“Surely it makes more sense than whatever flimsy explanations you might have heard so far. Whole towns once exist disappearing on a whim. Rampant disease and dreadful beasts left in the travelling omen’s wake. It’s easy enough to turn one’s head and evoke the Ard—there might even be some sliver of truth to such claims—but make no mistake. These calamities are manmade, no matter how much they might like seem otherwise, and even as we speak the poisoned maw makes open yet again.”

That was the last straw. She who unwillingly stood aside from the fray lunged forward. “Blasphemy—“

“Hold, soldier!” The slightest of perceived slights, whether of meaning or unfelt, was enough to draw a second blade, but this was a duel one-on-one and a single backwards parry returned Elsenlied’s sword back to her sheath. “But surely you realize how I can hardly take a lone person’s word as reliable evidence, especially in light of centuries and recent records kept.”

“And as you should. There’s nothing wrong with making a choice based on the most reliable information you have at your disposable. If we start questioning every little thing then soon enough you only realize that proof itself no longer qualifies and that the rules on which we make our judgments have no basis except in that.”

“Than what would you have?”

“All I ask is a simple thing. That based on our mutual comprehensions of each other’s different points of view regarding the current state of being of our knowledge, that we come to a mutually palpable understanding .”

“Simpler.”

“You intend to catch us. We intend to run and fight as needed. But, at least for a time, we will chose to stay regardless. At least until I’m certain this shadow has long passed. So I suppose what I am saying is: If you’re not willing to believe my story then, rather than causing all sorts of fuss and trouble, why not retreat to watch? You might even call for reinforcements to make the capture easier. And while you wait you can put yourself to use ensuring the definite safety of those you’ve sworn protect.” What it was was an offer—an offer of a temporary truce for mutual benefit, with either side holding whatever different truths.

“And if the truth is as you’ve told…” Lodis kept his chin to his pommel as he dug himself in thought.

“Then the place where I’ve promised won’t exist. Nothing will have changed and without a place to turn back south we will be trapped amidst the north. Not that you believe?”

“Right well—“

“Surely you can’t be thinking— What if they just run on us?”

“Wha’s a few young knights afrai’ for.” Where had he come from? And exactly how drunk was he? Joe had somehow come to intercede between the two.

“Who are you? I’d ask that you keep out of this.” Reaching for the older man’s elbow, subject to a strange twist that seemed almost as much part of slipping as a fall, Elsenlied tumbled down into the snow.

“At leas’ you got plen’y of spunk.” And no matter how she lashed out from the ground Joe’s feet always managed to remain steady—well, as much as a drunk’s steadiness could be.

Watching the comical scene was almost enough to make the others watching forget their hostile heat, leaving slower twitching noses’ drippings out to freeze.

“Ah… I believe it’s gotten rather cold. Perhaps we should continue on inside.” Lodis made an opportune suggestion.

“Agreed. It looks like they might last the night, but I’d hate to have them sniffling in the morning.” There were still some wrinkles to smooth out, but Hezran had made his point. Elsenlied was too wrapped up to fight in any case.

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Innocence

“Hey, hey sister… Hey, hey you…” The youngest boy was bewildered, going between the two girls whose curled backs were turned against each other at the farthest distance that could be manged while remaining closest to the fire. As Mai hung her knees with downturned, twisted face, Reivyn lay on her side still and empty as a lump of coal. “Come on, why don’t we play? Look I even brought my wooden horses and I’ve got figures… I’ll let one of you hug Teddy...b-both of you…”

“Now, now Age, come to daddy. We can play together.”

“Papa, why are they like that?” Children. They always had the cutest faces, and seemed to ask the hardest questions.

“Well, sometimes friends can argue.”

“Why? Isn’t it better to play together?”

*Why indeed?* What exactly had set these two off so? Kale had heard a bit about them before he came—when families had come mentioned so did others and so on extended—and he knew a bit as to why they were of foul mood, though as to why Hezran wouldn’t tell exact suffice to take the blame before he had left. *But then why the separation?* From Helen’s telling they had appeared quite close when they’d arrived.

Kale had thought his other son might know something more, but never had Cull run so fast to chores than now.

“Wh…”

*Wh…?*

“Why?” It was a trembling voice, still quiet and getting louder, caught somewhere between tears and madness, budding up from the very depths of emotion.

“Hey! Does sister finally want to play?”

“Shhh!” Now was not the time. Kale covered his boy’s ears and brought him close to chest.

“Why!!?“ She screamed. She turned around to face the other girl. Mai bellowed, breaking free of her damped hair that had curled to her eyes, as she charged the silent soul. “Why did you have to be!? Why didn’t you trust me?! Why did you lie to me?!Why won’t you tell me anything!? Why didn’t you care!? Why won’t you say anything…!?” But he laying girl didn’t speak and didn’t move. She just lay like an errant lump of stone. Even as the fists came she just lied and even as her cloak of dusk was torn at she remained completely silent.

Was it a stray or measured hand, or maybe both? Maybe it didn’t matter which. In an instant the hood was lifted and beneath it revealed hair so crimson as to seem stained with blood and a nebulous pair of mismatched eyes; and for a second Kale fought he saw a glimpse of black. But only for that fleeting second as the clutching girl’s hands came down.

It must have been painful. Only one would scream.

“What exactly are you…?” Azure globes spread down from cheek to cheek. Dagger spouted from tongue, but in the end she couldn’t bring herself to say the words—words she would never be able to take back. And maybe in the end that was what would save them both.

Looking down past her blinding clumps of ire and past the clumps she’d tugged so full of fire, Mai saw her tears weren’t the only glistening strings that made connect within those swirled, clouded eyes.

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Hypocrisies

“Welcome back.” The one who greeted them at the door was Cull, still peachy-red at face and tinged at ears—maybe he’d been sneaking out. From the sounds of clashing dishes Helen was making busy preparations.

Behind, near the fire in the living room it seemed the girls had woken. Hezran hadn’t expect them to make up so quietly—it wasn’t nearly that simple of a problem—but at the very least, a younger boy’s finger swears between, they were able to make common ground while Kale watched over warmly.

“I’ve been meaning to ask: How’d it go? Your talk’s already done?”

“For now.” Cull grimaced beneath swerved eyes. The most important words had passed, but a couple years’ nurtured foul mood would take more than a single night of familial bonding to solve. “Anyways…what are those two doing with you?”

“I wish I could tell you more. It seems they followed us passed that—what did you call it, the pouring of ice and snow—the avalanche?”

“Persistent.”

“Don’t worry. It seems I’ve been able to press them to serve for now; or rather I get the feeling it wasn’t really me.”

“That would be a first. But, you’re sure? They don’t seem too happy.” In fact, with Joe’s drunken arms draped over her shoulders, Elsenlied looked set to lose it on the moment, but every time she tried to shake him off she found the slippery grip twisted even stronger.

“Well it is what it is. Time is a luxury at the moment.”

“Is it the eclipse?”

“You knew it?”

“Well… Didn’t you say at one point? I mean you seemed pretty disturbed about it when we first came.”

“I suppose you right about that. As long as it’s not just any ordinary moon, but the one of my memories…” Maybe it was time.

As they moved over to the fireside Hezran began to explain the rest of his origins. Reivyn, of course, already knew the whole of it, though she was still at tangles coming to terms, especially learning of Mai’s standpoint as one of many orphans who either were or knew others so displaced.

“Imagine that? On the other side of that black orb floating in the sky there are thousands other like us.”

“There might be as many or more than the entire number spread out on this blue-bound speck of earth below.”

“Then why not come and take over the ground? There’d be plenty more space for them that way and from your descriptions I’m sure they wouldn’t have any trouble.”

“Well I can’t say for sure… Ideology is a powerful thing; at times enough to break dissociate from the more concrete bounds described by flesh’s identity.”

“But they’re still people?”

“It’s because they are still people, with all the fragilities that come with mortal knowledge. It’s a culture nurtured from the hatred of all things human, even knowing full well that their shape and form can’t change so easily; though more than few have tried. Instead the simpler route was to hold themselves different from those who tread the earth—Earthcrawlers, Dirtworms, Mudeaters among other names. It’s why they don’t like anything that seems to bridge the gap and why they hail their king so strongly who for all terms and reason seems to have shaken death. If you want my plain opinion the whole act is merely one small portion of a greater separation and denial.”

“They would go so far? All to keep themselves to their selfish, blackened moon?”

“Down here that’s what you call it. Hell, it’s even the first thing that came to me seeing it from below. To them it has another name, the name of their home—Freyr.”

“Freyr…?” Cull grasped the hairs along the back of his neck. “It reminds me of another story this one guy once showed me—the one thing he was good for—though I didn’t care to remember because it was he who showed it. It was the story of an old god that fell in love with a giant he was supposed to be opposed. He threw away his sword so not to kill her and eventually as cause was killed.”

“You’re always full of wisdom aren’t you? I’d like to start by drawing similes, but I’m afraid the truth is so far passed that any records that exist to such have no doubt burned. Either way what’s important is that I’ve taken my time to look its guidance and within not two nights from now the moons will overlap. White will be engulfed by black. And then…”

“But what proof do you have that this will be the same.” Lodis knocked his hilt against the floor. How could he know for sure? It could very well just be the delusions of a thirsty mind starved of hope taking fragile mimics as the real meat. After all, despite explaining many circumstances, a breach in time was hardly less farfetched, though the king himself had mentioned righting pasts.

“Nothing that I can show. Just my thoughts and memories…the knowledge of one who knows the inner workings and their time.” And that was the truth. Hezran just wanted to avoid taking the worst of chances, and maybe grasp just a bit of self-satisfaction—that it wasn’t hopeless.

“You keep saying them and their, but where does that place you.”

“Like everyone else I started from the ground. I was taken up a little earlier in life—later in time—than some others. And I was never given much reason to love, just to exist. At the time I thought to me that was both enough and everything; however, times change. And now they’re all the more a reason to fight back.”

“So…what would you have us do?”

“First comes first. It needs to be decided how we’re going to vanish. They won’t take kindly to a whole batch of their materials disappearing overnight. It would be ideal if we could wait to the very last minute lest they realize their harvest’s run, but if we wait too long there will be only so much distance we can travel. …What we really need is some place nearby, and preferably hard to find.” A hollow. A ditch. A cave. A forest. It had to be large enough to house those moving and supplies for days. It also had to be close enough that they could transport everything short of dawn’s break since the sun’s first sink. Otherwise they’d be left on the open lam and Hezran had no confidence that they’d be able to outrun their pursuers.

“If that’s the case then there may be just the place.” Until now Kale had remained comfortable staying to the side, a touch calmer than one might expect considering the threatening of his home. What exactly had been written in Darren’s letter? “Not even many locals travel far, so it’s no surprise that no one noticed. If it wasn’t for tonight and our game of cat and mouse we probably wouldn’t have either. Haven’t you wondered on hearing the whistling of the winds?”

“You mean from the mountains?”

Kale nodded in response. It certainly was something worth the thought. The sounds they made implied the room for air to pass and in turn some form of hollowness. But that itself was no form of guarantee of room for housing. “What about them?”

“Coming closer than we ever had before Cull and I took an unlucky stumble into its depths, though not far, but it seemed deep enough despite the dust and rubble. I don’t know about an extended stay but a few days should be easy enough at least. Best yet it only takes a few hours sprint due—“

“Are you really going to trust him?” Just a stranger come to interrupt their daily lives with naysaying of their doom?

Hezran had always been prepared for such an eventuality. If anything Elsenlied’s doubts actually made things easier. “She does have a point. In that case, I don’t particularly need to know.”

“Is that fine?”

“I told you: I intend to stay here till the end. But for that price, I’d also ask that those of less than permanent residence be kept in the dark as well. No matter whom they might be.”

“What—?”

“There’s always the risk of a few extra ears peering down beneath the clouds. The less that know of our plans, the safer it will be for all.”

“You don’t trust us.” Or rather, Lodis would say, the Order that both he and Elsen claimed a part.

“It’s the perfect setting. People are given a false sense of security. They truly believe they are being kept safe. And perhaps they are, but that doesn’t mean that safety comes without a cost. Hundreds and thousands of sacrifices. Children crying with tears in their eyes. Mothers and fathers stripped of their lives. For those taken and left survive the pain is often only greater. They’ll be kept alive, if for some thye can even call it that. Sometimes on the brink of death, bodies twisted to grotesque forms and shaved bit by bit till something else entirely. Others live to eat, but for which their souls are twisted unbelievably instead.

“Is any cost ever worth that price? I’d beg to differ. I’d beg to stand. I’d bat off cruelty. I’d bay off despair. I would dare hope and strike the iron guided by that fragile life even if I risk stub my toe, or cut my hand, or even crush my brain.

“I’m not a fighting spirit. I had my chances long ago. And, now I have the fortune of another. Knowing their ways it would be easy enough to have lived a singular life of peace, though given the past few weeks I am not sure even that would have been allowed. Even so, especially now, I choose to cast my dice, crooked and chipped as they may be. If I am set to be a demon then my singular desire is to be able to claim for myself and only me: I am a demon who tried to protect. From the precious skies above to the glimmered crevices deep below I would scatter my shadowed shield and dare attract all the hate, the harm, the reason—all upon myself. And still stand steady beneath the heavy pillar wrought between.”

Hezran had never thought himself one for speeches; he rather liked to think the thoughts than actually put them to words. And perhaps that is where they should have remained, rather than the awkward silence taking over. But at least one deemed to take his word seriously enough to bode an answer—given the state of the answerer that might not exactly have been a soothing proposition.

However, there was something sharp about Joe’s mouth that belied his drunkenness. “What if you weren’t the first who tried to break the spell? Do you really think things can change so easily?”

“A shadow can only work its magic if there are other people to cast the light. Just like with both the moons above.”

“And what if that light proves too strong? What if it leaves no place for your shadow?”

“Then perhaps that’s for the best. If the light’s so strong it will keep burning even so.”

“Some shadows don’t need light. They keep growing even when they’re covered or blotted out.”

“Every shadow needs some source for bright.” A shadow without a reason wasn’t really a shadow. It just was. And even then it needed a reason, even as simple and strong as mundane pleasure. Even claiming no reason was a form of reason in itself. “Besides, it’s not so simple as saying I don’t trust. If I didn’t put my trust in you and Cull and even our noble knights right here, we all wouldn’t be together here today. Sometimes I trust in other’s trust and sometimes I trust that others trust others more. Yet even more so I trust in taking the path that generates the most trust from me.”

“It’s just clever wording isn’t it?”

“Then ask yourself this: As much as doubting other’s trust can be seen as a form of distrust, can’t trusting something also be the same. By trusting something, implicitly it means that in turn you are distrusting something else.”

“Sophistry.”

“It is sophistry.”

“Now, now, don’t you all get so heated. Before you’re stressed to burst fill your stomachs for your minds.” Helen clapped both men on the back. “There’s no room for such enlightened bickering underneath my roof.”

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Scissors

“You’ve done great to make it this far.” Of course, his partner in conversation was silent in response besides the slight cooing it gave off as it nudged its grains.

The pigeon’s muddled wings fluttered beneath the fire as to scatter the last remains of crystal shards. For such a messenger it would have been better have been black. Looking at it flight, the man could only think of how his own wings had long been clipped.

“I suppose it’s finally time to be heading back.”

--

Warming Mud

“The scarecrows seemed to have worked well enough.”

At odds against the snow were several straw bundles formed vaguely to the shape of human bodies and clothed to match. Every night they would be moved and even during the day they played at friendship travelling arm and arm across the snow. Fortunately the strands of yellow that slipped between were too small to be mistaken even as the leak of piss upon the ground from high above. Still, it was impossible to hide that the crowd was thinning over time.

“I don’t know if it’s so much the extra bodies themselves or just a lack of care. I suppose I should just be thankful things have gone so smoothly so far.”

All the meanwhile, within the spare turns of the day, those who slipped inside bound bundles of necessities and valuables to take along. The first night’s test had been valuable in bringing the most important—grain, water, berries, dried meat; whisky. Of course, Hezran hadn’t been able to come along himself but the trip went without a hitch, though the carriages’ return caught up close to morning light. The biggest concern had been the animals—wolves and bears and the like; Ard forbid the stranger. Still, there was something about the moon that even the most ravenous of animals knew to stay away.

Even now with the second dusk passed and the last halfway begun to set they could never be too careful. While others got the carts ready for the last night’s trip, the rest were still moving frantically about making sure the village seemed working and alive until the final moment.

“Are you sure about this. This is something far larger than just you or me or her. Hundreds of lives will be at stake. If you fail it could be worse.” It was a conversation they’d had before, one on which Joe seemed particularly intent on dragging.

“Save the few or risk the many, you mean… Say, what would you do?”

“I’ve already chosen. Isn’t that why you’ve had me leave?” His were weary, tried eyes.

Hezran’s were as well. “I can’t give anyone up… Or more like I’ll never let myself again. Not as long as even a single sliver of hope remains… As long as I can convince them it’s still there.”

“Even if you were one of the few that would be saved?”

“Even if. Maybe there’s something severely wrong with my sense of self. Maybe I’ve been disconnected. I just couldn’t care less. I couldn’t live with the thought of what might have been. Even if all the signs pointed to impossible; I’d still go through the same.”

“…You wouldn’t have been the first to try.”

“The milk’s already spilt; tears won’t dry it up.” No matter what had happened in the past, nor how many variables had been set in stone, this future was still unseen. “It was a pleasure having you, and thank you for having us so long.”

“I’ll get your message delivered…for both our sakes I hope we never meet again.” It had been a final gift: for Hezran, the gift of a final hand to play, and for Joe, the gift of a final distraction to his purpose. “Since you’re set on your path I suggest you at least take care of discontent while you can. People will betray over the smallest of things, in the largest of ways.” At least they were warm enough for Joe to pass a parting warning of concern. It was a pity that this might be their final meeting on such amiable terms.

As the carriage ferried shortly down the craggy slope Hezran thought he saw a stealthy glance slip from the back of the hooded cloth that had remained so silent on departure. Mai probably still felt betrayed.

And Joe was right. It wasn’t all bells and whistles. There’d been a few cases of items missing and sometimes someone else’s valuables found their places mysteriously where others didn’t. These things were bound to happen any time there was uncertainty or strife. Still, it hurt. Unnecessary fights bring necessary resolutions. Hezran wouldn’t have been able to handle such alone and for that he was all the more thankful for the emblem’s presence. “Speak of the devil and they will come.”

“I knew thought poorly of us but I hadn’t thought it quite so bad.”

“Don’t worry, I actually quite enjoy your presence. So, what’s gone off now?”

“This time the problem is more of spirit than anything physical. And we were still having trouble convincing the laggards as it was.” Lodis shot a look towards his subordinate, her eyes sidled innocently with pursed lips.

“Did you tell them the purpose, that it could be as little as days. At most a small trip away.”

“That’s if your fears are innocent…I’ve explained that to them. There’s an old retiree that’s giving us trouble. He’s not a weakling either and I could swear I’ve seen some old paintings of him in the Hall of Knights.” It was a place of commemoration for those who had sworn to highest duty and accomplished their greatest tasks. As to why someone like that would have been shunned so far north they could only guess.

“But you didn’t tell him anything else did you?”

“Against an immovable object I had hoped to bring some sway, not that he wasn’t adamant enough to learn. Though disgraced it seems he still has an ear or two where the council regards. He’s demanded a meeting…for the both of you.”

“You even told him that much.”

“I’m afraid so. Not so much for details though.”

So they had one former zealous knight who learned their leanings and would now take the Ardent Order place to strike them down? No doubt it would come to blows, but the fact that he was willing to talk all the while made for a little hope, if not a sullen spectacle. But left alone the word might spread to embolden the naiver fools against their health.

“…Where can I meet this sir?”

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Torch

“So, old friend, I’d never have imagined I would be seeing you again in all these years. And you don’t look a day older to show it, for me to even be catching up in number of greying beards. Well tell it! What brings you?”

“Merely travelling.”

“And I see you bought some rather troublesome types along the way.”

“It couldn’t be helped, but I can only play along so long before signs of cracks begin to form.”

“I can hardly imagine why?”

“I have a debt of gratitude to pay.”

“Saving your daughter? But that was so long ago.”

“Time works in mysterious ways.” Besides it was still a process, with the weaving of many altered strands.

“Well they do say seeing is believing, I suppose. I’ll just have to make sense of this myself.”

“I’ll leave it up to you.”

“So you don’t mind how hard I go?”

“…”

“Relax. I have no intention of backing down. However, if you don’t leave soon, the cracks are only going to get even wider.”

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Violent Stage

“So you’re the bastard, and the little bastardess.”

“We all turn bastard or other at one point in our lives. Perhaps the more literal meaning might be taken as the better.”

“And only a most bastardlike criminal would deem to steal the very lifeblood of those they would claim save, and right beneath their very eyes at that.” The accuser certainly had all the rage and words, the pointing fingers and binding accusations; enough to make one wonder one’s own just, even with the counter knowledge.

“I’d suggest your eyes serve better uses then.”

“Spoken like a fiend.”

“So why have you had us meet here, in secret?” Their conversation as it began to unfold occurred not beneath dwindling rays of sun, but in the deep, dank underbelly of a coffin-like cellar left half-empty from the previous night’s raid. Their only light a single lantern.

“The people are expressing doubts, and I have my own as well, all the more accentuated by the words of my juniors. You see even if it was a home to which they were cast unwanted it is still a home nonetheless and people are loath to leave that which they know. If that weren’t enough there are the disappearances; fear enough changes the most honest. And know I learn your nature. I’m sure you can understand where this is going?”

“As much as one can believe in the *nature* coming spouted from that mouth, I can.”

“If so that makes things easy. Some have chosen dead set to stay and I would with them.” The small light revealed a glint as a length of wood and iron shifted from its dustings amongst the dirt on the wall.

“I’d wondered why such a dangerous thing had been planted by the wall.” Of course, that was flattery.

It was a spear, a lance, a harpoon in shape. Longer than the lengths and widths of the hollow space it needed to be handled at an angle, and even then that was a stretch, forcing its wielder to take his lowest crouching form. Even so disadvantaged the staff flexed malleable beneath its master’s grip and its tipping sliver was quick to pierce—straight for idle hearts.

A spurt of crimson. Not so much of the lifeblood’s source of flow, but enough to punch the beating.

“That was mighty selfless of you.”

“Even I can be selfish at times.” If Reivyn refused to move than he would stand against any fang, time and time again. “Some lessons are best taught wordlessly.” And this one certainly didn’t go unheeded.

“A fine sentiment but I wonder how many of my wasp stings it will take to wake the sleeping dragon; more so whether you can stand the stinger’s numbness till that time comes.” There was the sound of breaking glass and the sputtering of remaining embers. Between the fluttering flies of dispersing light the flurry of rushing streaks seemed almost as mirage and ghost as vanishing.

Soon Hezran’s eyes were useless without a source to draw and he was left with only ears and the touch of cuts. Some he dodged, others he couldn’t, and yet more and more he failed to. Even healing as he was the greedy needles drawing blood began to take their toll; like a slow venom seeping through his bones he felt his body drain.

“Is your resolve really all so shallow?”

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Captor’s Shackles

When Hezran and Reivyn finally resurfaced from the underground cellars both were worse for wear. While Hezran had taken most the scratches and gashes, Reivyn’s face appeared far the wetter. For both a renewed sense of fire felt lit beneath their lives.

Still it would have been troublesome to wander around in such a state so it was fortunate they did not have to leave far. “Here.” A sheet of cloth floated tenderly through the air.

“That’s quite considerate.” Though it hadn’t been quite a trap, Lodis was the one who saw them in.

“I’d prepared a bag also if that is what it came to.”

“You’re not displeased?”

“It was a fight he bought; neither he nor I have any right to complain, though that’s far different from acceptance mind you. If you had failed take him out it’d have simply meant that whatever plans you had were always doomed to fail. If he wasn’t strong enough, well, that just means he couldn’t have stopped you trying anyways.”

“Handicapped as he was?”

“Pride is a troublesome thing. Still, I have a feeling that any such events that would occur in the coming hours won’t be nearly so kind.”

“You make it sound as if you wouldn’t stay.” It was a bit of a surprise that, even now, they would be so willing to walk away.

“Just shortly we received a bird, while you were busy with your dungeon visit. We’ve been called back and with reprimand for our acting of volition; the poster’s words so elegant to say our wings of wax already drooping beneath the cold sun’s rays. How they knew so much your doubt is mine, but if there’s one thing that’s certain, it’s that things are a lot more complicated than dare be said aloud.”

“If their eyes are spread so wide maybe it’s just your safety they have in mind.” Knowing now as like as knowing then.

“I’d sure hope so. The other…well, I’d rather not even think about it. They did mention that others would be coming in our place, however.”

“And I wonder who these precious others might be. Will they come by riding noble steeds or on mechanical wings?”

“I’d much rather believe the former.”

“Don’t tell me you’re actually starting to believe these psychos’ sayings!?” Psychos, murderers—it certainly wasn’t the least kind thing they had been called by her. There was only one target for Elsenlied’s furor.

“What I believe is irrelevant; my duty will always come first. But I will at least take count of all coincidences piling up before me.”

“For all you say of duty you sure made a blunder of things this time around.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I couldn’t hear. I was under the impression we were under no such orders till the latest reached our ears.”

“…You’re equally bad.” Exasperation? Conclusion? At least she seemed to realize there was only one route forward.

“Maybe so. Never mind that but go and fetch the horses would you. This dreary state begins to take its toll.”

“Aye aye, sir. We’ll have you out of it soon enough.”

“…If only your words would allow me to believe.” Lodis stared sidelong from the ground even as his muttered word’s only trailed her from behind. “As for you I wouldn’t have you think you’ve shaken me quite yet. I’ve made arrangements with Helen. I hoped you wouldn’t mind.”

“That depends really, on what particularly you had in *mind*.”

“Nothing too strenuous I assure you; I’m sure you at least had part the thought. There’s a field of open snow, shaped like a pair of deathly wings, just beyond the forest there and before another forest till the mountains’ sides.” Hezran knew the place. He knew it far too well. “On the second fortnight past your reckoning I arranged to have a meeting, all very hush-hush considering who knows what disasters or emotions come befall. If everything goes smooth as planned us three sides will have our meeting and share our knowledge. The purer of driven snow might even see you cuffed to ice that day. You won’t even have to walk back to find your bars.”

“That’s all very convenient and all…but what if everything is as I’ve ordained.”

Lodis grimaced slightly, touching one hand to his back and the other to his forehead. “If it is there might be prints one less, though I’d hope that another’d come in place. Either way you could take that as my message—I’m no longer by your side.”

“Did something happen?” Hezran saw the look of a man who had given up, called to heel after having forced every effort in his running astray.

“I always find myself realizing more and more how the old adage is true: Ignorance really is the only bliss.”

“Ha-ha, so true. At times like those I just remember—we are fortunate to be able to understand as such.”

“And so the warming of our hearts!” For even the horses neighs shivered as they closed. Beneath the adjutant’s stern, unfaltering gaze Lodis brought his foot to stirrup. The beasts might share their warmth, but they were none too eager to keep their riders from their chains. “I would at least have you remember that no matter how far you choose to run I’ll manage to chase you down.”

“And if you whither down to bones the meanwhile.”

“Then my spirit will, whether it be some pagans rampant specter or the Ardent’s crystal stone—at least that’s what they tell us awaits the greatest piousness. I’m not sure I’d want that kind of eternal life…” Any retort had long been spent; Lodis’s mouth as dead as Elsenlied’s ears, except for moving feet and hands. Both gave a tap to the sides of their steeds to start them off, careening far into the distance upon the treads of Joe who had left before them.

*If only they hadn’t left the trouble in their stead.* There was a corpse in the shed and pitchforks up ahead. *But if they’re to keep alive I’d better have them all play dead.*

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Static Vision

*Crunch…Crunch…Crunch…*with every rise the countless blizzard flakes floated down and with every footfall they were packed into the ground; once creased markings of solid leather boots and severed strings of fur-lined comfort shoes soon filled back, only to be emancipated from ice again. The sorrowed travelers’ backs of black and brown became filled by powdered white until the salt-like layer turned indistinguishable from the surrounding snow and even the rope connecting them together became clotted beneath their clutches. It was heavy…oh, so heavy. But that cold weight hardly compared the weighing at their souls.

At the final dusk the sky had seemed so dark yet clear; the blotting orb above imposing in its growth. And then when first began the fade of crowning light the flakes had started fall—an appearance not unlike a globe of snow, though reverse, as they were as shielded from outside—and in that moment the blackened moon seemed almost as protector of the sight. Those who stayed claimed the signs and those with doubts were quick to side; with those left chose to leave and cry.

It had happened, in an instant a betrayal? The worst of them. And so they were left carrying the layered snow on top of layered bodies on top of layered thoughts of no return. The weight was too much…and even Helen and Kale and Cull who led at front were dragged of feet. The only lighter steps were left to Age and the other whistling children on their way.

“And so the hammer falls.” Kale felt as if his knees had been crushed from behind the caps. It was painful to even move and with each foot forward he felt his heart sunk ever further down despite their rising. It was not like it had been completely unexpected. More like he might have thought it necessary, but even so it had the feel: *Ah, so this is what it means to be a villain.*

“Well, it’s not like we gave them all that much of a choice.” Maybe it was out of habit, for the sole purpose of being contradictory towards his father. Cull’s words lacked conviction though they were not condemning.

“Even so, I’m sure there were better ways to go about it.”

“And what about the time, there was nothing left. As long as they're all still breathing why should they complain? It’s not like I haven’t done any worse.” Stealing. Gold and trinkets and food and leather. Coin and handwork and drink and metal. Even if it was from the rich, and however he might choose to play the hooded ranger, his crimes still left those behind worse off than before. “I! …At least I will hold his truth.” Once again Cull stole, this time from the rope at knotted head dragging it further into the darkness well ahead.

“Don’t go so far ahead!” *Away from where I can reach you. To those places and further, where I can’t even see your face; where I can’t watch over you as any father should.* Just one hand following the trailing coattails of Cull’s wintered cloak floating idly in the icy winds was not nearly enough. It was not long before Kale’s other hand begun to lose its grip; slipping from the rope that binded him to this world, to himself, and to Cullen…only to be clasped by another keep him bound.

“Let him go. It’s his life to live and his choice as to whom to follow, whatever they might be called.”

“If he wasn’t one before he certainly is now. The whole lot of them...” They were…

“But look. At least he’s left a thread for you to follow.” Even if they were separated by a thousand miles—no matter if their thoughts strayed eternally apart—they were and would always be connected, just as everyone to each and every person that they’d met and meet, and thus to even the ruiners who’d left them so marked. “Everyone’s minds been put in doubt; they’re all too fearful to turn back. Still, that damned fool Hezran, he’d better hope we thank him once this is over—and the poor girl.”

“She did at least seem better for it though.” Kale didn’t know how Reivyn was before, but the more he watched her the more he felt the depths of doubt—that something strong was missing—and even his cheerful Age could hardly bring her cheer. It wouldn’t be lying to say that at the time he’d worried for his son’s safety more than just a bit, his forward nature and fearless warmth, but the fleeting glance she’d left at last meeting in the dark was filled with another warmth her own.

“Quite true. It’s amazing how even the simplest of emotions can be twisted so, though I won’t say it’s necessarily bad.” Helen herself had seen her fair share of vagrants in her time, from youth to grown, as they had piled into her frigid town of birth with only ice to warm their souls. Even her father and her mother came the same—rejected, dreary, and downcast; still in love, but full of blame. At those times the cold would chill their rage and the longer nights would keep their darkness feeling light. With new life born, soon enough smiles were the only things frozen by the frigid winds. “Are you sure you wouldn’t rather take her in?”

“That you’d say that still as seeing what I’ve done to mine, It’s far too kind; maybe a little painful. Of course I’d welcome her if she chose to come, no matter how she is, but she wouldn’t—definitely not—and I’d rather not lose my hand to feed her.”

“Her teeth did look rather sharp, didn’t they?” Helen chuckled warmly and Kale blushed up redder yet from clasped hands up to face. Even an older man as such could have his youthful romance beneath her melting smile, rusted and worn of love as he was he’d never say. And maybe it was just the tricks of frolicked fairies that muddled his mind to think she grasped tighter looking in his eyes.

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Lonely World

*Crunch…Crunch…Crunch…*silent; ever so silent. The windows were empty, the fires dulled, and the doors closed shut; only the mellowed whispers of winds’ howling cries and shivers accompanied their paired footsteps in the night.

The two of them alone again….*how long had it been.* Hezran knew it was short—more than weeks but fewer months—even then he hardly remembered how it felt. Set out on their own, just him and her and with him the only voice; awkward and peaceful, but short to be disrupted as they’d met two others: Cull and Joe. One was loud, the other silent and strong; together they’d made everything quite the clamour. Different thoughts and different voices, clashing fists and soothing hands…things he’d thought he’d given up; things she’d never had—and with Mai as well.

*How are you feeling?* His own little thorn of loneliness had grown large enough to surprise himself.

*As long as were together I’ll never be lonely.* It was amazing to think how far they had come, more in person than in distance. Once a void cored by seething anger, Reivyn now expressed fluent passion gleaned from meaning of her own. *And besides there are the others too.* Reivyn lifted her wrist to show him the bracelet linked with sparkling stones that seemed to light with color as she spoke. She’d really changed so much. Perhaps he had to too…had he.

*They don’t make you afraid.* He himself couldn’t hear their voices very well; to him they spoke just static and fuzzy images, though even that had changed of late with only brief glimpses through Reivyn and her dreams. Those dreams weren’t always happy.

*They tell me things, more about them than me though they think of me too. They don’t know for sure, they know more than they will tell and even more has lost; but at least they mean no harm. They know they were freed from the screeching and the noise—their forced embedding, twisting and clashing with other souls. Swirled and swirled around to mush.* Two minds, one vessel. Hezran imagined it would take an incredible amount of synchronicity to stay in peace—either that of the loss of one too overwhelmed by the other. *It was painful, so incredibly painful. Especially for them, eternal in their corporeal lacking, where the terror of mental vanishing was all-consuming. Being freed from that darkest place and grating, even partially spoiled—they couldn’t be more thankful. And they know you helped them too.*

It was not something he particularly meant. He did for him and her.

*It doesn’t matter. What’s important is what’s been done; frantic, maliced, hapless, hopeless or selfish reasons aside.* The words were the same.It was like she saw his very depths, the parts he struggled to keep buried layers and layers beneath such they never surfaced in his mind—so she would never see—his efforts laughable, his body sighed.

*But what does that mean for the times we fail?* And what if I betrayed you?

*At least I will know you tried and you’ve kept me in your mind. That’s already enough been changed for me.* Is that how far she’d come? Leaps and bounds in seconds, so far she seemed practically out of sight against the voiceless sun, her decision as it was made.

Change was really needed—starting with that.

A sound from above, it wasn’t the flapping of migrate wings nor the buzzing of a locust swarm. Barely audible above the falling snow they whirred, propellers of invisible doom descending from the blacker sky.

“There’s no rest for the wicked!”

*Was there really a need to shout that all out loud?*

*Yes*, there was*.* As much for them as for him, those final steps weren’t getting any further

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Hope for the Shattered

There was one point, only one, when Hezran had thought his trek through endless blizzards might have been coming to an end. That that glowing, fragile, bleating light he chased grew stronger—closer—just beyond the torrential snow.

He’d cut his mind, he’d trained his body; proven himself in a constant pull to bring him closer to the line—to become a useful, hated, but necessary tool, and earn himself some space. And so he had given to drowning himself in his solitary state of calculated emptiness within his empty coffin, as if watching a clear-blue surface from the silt beneath the waves; steady, silent, and rippleless.

It was silent. It was peaceful. It was enough to let him forget of time.

But time is always moving and the world always changes. And as the world changes so must the immutable. The first signs of ripples came with a solitary knock on his solitary coffin’s door.

*Ignore it. Don’t even think of answering. Don’t let the floods of pain come in again.*

The voices always whispered. The knocking never stopped. Louder. Louder! The ripples blotted out the words.

*Ah…no choice.* Hezran finally rose from his resting cushions to reach that twisted handle that kept the cold inside, and on the other side…

“H-hello… U-um; I’m searching for someone—a-a Mr. Halter! I hope this is the right place.” Muttering and stuttering, a slight bite of lip and downcast gaze flirting with the empty space, the younger girl clutched the folding envelope in her trembling hands even tighter to her chest. He imagined the girl might be around his sister’s age right now if he still knew her. “Everyn ‘s— Please! Have a look!”

Was it the light or just mirage?

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Jump

*Clackle…clackle…clackle…*the cart had almost reached the bottom of the mountain road. To the south they could go circle back to Nementium and then down to the capital; then again it might be nice to take the scenic route nearer to the ocean that they had only glimpsed afar. Certainly things were moving—they kept moving faster than he’d expected. If he wasn’t careful things might spiral out of control, he really should be heading back with all haste but…

The merchant stared back into his cargo. He couldn’t see her face but the baggage heaved comfortingly behind. She was clearly weary from the days; both the anger and the cries. At least at the very end it looked as if she’d been able to make it up a little, with the passing of a precious stone between their girlish hands.

…If he wasn’t careful she might learn to hate him too.

He wasn’t really ready to leave this casual life behind. Surely a few more months pretending couldn’t harm. In that time the earth might crumble and the sky might fall and the world might burn around them. But really, what was the harm?

She had no family; he had had his. Those glaring eyes had never forgiven him. Maybe he could start anew. A new family; a new warm home—one with the laughter they’d forgot and the smiles they’d left behind. It might hurt her but she already hated him so and if eventually they could meet with even eyes again; maybe he could introduce her and they could be as sisters however separated they were by time and blood. He wanted to learn how family worked again. Ah, how he wished he could go back…

*Clank…clackle…*the sound of something jutting. Was it a stray pebble or rock beneath the wheel? But no, it felt like something bigger, the cart seemed lighter too; as much as his mind though not his heart.

*It seems my decision is being made for me. How, unfortunate.* Jealously, was it? He was way past the age to be feeling such things but so he was. *So incredibly jealous…*

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Nightmares Return

“All right people, you know the drill. Let’s make this quick and simple—in and out. As soon as we touch down I expect you all to push in groups. Don’t get separated! We’ll take all we need, make sure there’s nothing to tell a story, but enough scars to strike fear. Got it!”

“Why so cautious captain? All we’re doing is hunting moles, though some of them might be pretty enough to stoke our coals.” The finger in the ring, a vulgar sign. Domination and dehumanization. Even would be ladies had their own interpretation.

“And you better not be the first to trip on head, I’ll be making sure to read the diary of whosoever ends in bandages before night’s end. Though perhaps it’s not those dug in earth we ought to fear. I think we all know who I mean…isn’t that right you two.” The demon’s laughter played out across the screens condemning and demeaning. To their two fur-born inductees their torches seemed as blazing as for them, such that they wished stay buried for eternal winters come.

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A Dead Revisiting

“It’s beginning.” Hezran could hear the countless footsteps trampling the barren, frozen earth. He could hear the fire starters make their way to crashing doors and crushing bores. Glass shattering, mud crumbling, wood clattering, and air crackling.

The cold night was beginning to turn warm with noise though still yet far away. It would take time. Muddled memories could hardly do it justice; it made him want to close his eyes and cover her ears. At least there were few screams this time. Just echoes.

Frustration—howls could be heard from just beyond. They’d come quicker than before with less to block their way. But it was not their place. Not them for whom they waited.

*Perhaps it’s time we start a little fire of our own. Can I count on you?*

*You need even ask?* From her seat sat cradled in his lap, bright-eyed and with fresh brushed hair, Reivyn lifted her arm towards the still still door and chanted some broken, whispered noise beneath her breath. With his arm wrapped round hers he could see what she saw and fear what she imagined. The scattered, hazardous flames that invaders laid were turned into twisted spears of fire jutting out to pierce their own creator’s legs.

*Make sure to leave a gap for him to come.* As for now there were only a few carnal flowers pouting on the ground; he’d be loath to gather more. A few could be counted as delusion. Any more would seem a pattern. Hopefully their man would make it through before the entire field blossomed red.

*Is it him?*

*It is.* Finally. At last.

The man was just as fearful as Hezran had known; and seemed to relish more than slight as the fallen zombies clawed powerlessly from their graves. Was it just Hezran’s imagination that the newer spears seemed more aimed for heart than he would have intended.

Even so, Hal slipped between the bolts—one by one by two; a duck and then a jump and then a spin—ever so effortlessly; like they were hardly the pointed, scathing edges they would seem and merely his partners in a blazing dance of flames.

*Seriously…* Hezran had always known him good—though of different year and class sometimes Hal had come intrude upon—but Hezran hadn’t expected near this much, so swift. Just how much had he trained behind the scenes.

It seemed bare moments he’d been spotted and already Hal had reached the door to make further cracks appear along the rim, just bare enough to let a spine of pointed earth burrow in between the gaps.

*Ugh…* It came too fast, leaving Reivyn caught off-guard, but that was fine. Hezran was waiting with open hand and though the spike pierced through his fur and flesh the bone and fibre proved strong and resilient; enough to hold until his nails crushed the object whole.

“Shoot first, kill sure.” No words. That was how it had always gone as such. The glow of orange in the frame was still half grown before a second and third shot through the gate. No mercy or the ultimate—it depended which side you asked; at what time. Either way they hardly reached halfway this time before they were met by concussive mines of flame floating in the air. A touch set of a flare, burning the earth so quick to burst, sending scattered shots of molten rock that left long black traces along the walls lest they be cooled by an oceanic wall that Reivyn set around them. Banned items of indifferent destruction; were they something she’d found and taken from his mind?

*Pop! Pop! Pop!* Like candied rocks sparking in the mouth the spikes of rock kept came and the bulbs of fire ignited over and over again. It didn’t take long to scorch the room and burn the curtains raw. Would the shooter run out from bullets or would their shelter crumble first… *I suppose it doesn’t matter, but this attraction might prove fatal in time.*

By now Hal had entered half-way through the door, still firing off his stave, though more cautious in his aimed. Every gap he aimed for he found was flowed to fill and the more he shot the closer the orbs came and the more dangerous for him.

Beneath Hezran’s palm he felt Reivyn’s arm heat up and then her forehead to match her heated breath. The exertion took its toll though she would tell no signs. Not at the point of anguish, still Hezran worried of worse to come.

*You can stop now.*

*But…*

*Don’t worry, even he’s slowed down—he’s likely tired out as well—*though both of them knew full well that the daggers hadn’t sheathed, they’d merely been clothed in wait. *You’ve done an amazing job protecting us both; getting us this far, so close. Let me protect us now. At this rate I might start to lose my confidence.*

Lifting himself from the ground ever so carefully not to drop her down, Hezran watched as the minefield slowly evaporated all to naught. Just as he’d expected, as soon as a gap appeared the earth began prodding once again—this time with Hezran ready. As soon as they came near to even scratching, voids of black appeared to hold them in embrace. Both sides moved closed step by step across the remains of wooden planks, shot for cut and cut for shot; closer and closer, until they stared each other in the eye.

“Hezran!!? …What!? But…?” Hal looked to his behind—of course there was nothing to see

“Confused? I would be. Still you don’t need so alarmed your friend is perfectly fine and safe. In fact he should be heading here right now if things haven’t changed much more.”

“Then what are you?” Brisk and to the point, Hal had already shaken of a large part of the shock and a fiery animosity was beginning to take place of his once cold reckonings.

“I didn’t say you were wrong, all you need to know is that you’re not quite right either. Whether you’d believe me or not: I have the same identity; all the while being a different person grown of different times and different places.” Evidently an explanation not worth many points. Was it getting louder outside, or was that just Hezran’s imagination—he hoped. “In any case, I’m not here for the herd, nor to play vest for rifle for the matter. You can set this place on fire after leaving for all I care; though it is a little sad. The reason I—we—are here; I came to talk to you.”

“And should I plug my ears…?”

“Well that would be rather annoying. Is a friendly face not worth the words?”

“You never know for sure.” Who could be watching, who could be listening, and what lay under the smiling mask. That was the nature of their berth. ”But I suppose just listening never hurt.” All the while at the ready with channelled force in stave and a finger clutched to loosened trigger.

“That’s fine.” *That’s enough.* Now with a tentative understanding established, at last they could speak their minds.

“I have a warning. Whatever plan you have, you should abandon it.”

“Plans…? Plans you say. As if there could be any under chains.”

“And don’t we both know it, but sometimes it takes more than logic to show our minds the truth. Hope is wonderful, if fleeting. I’d push you farther forward if there were not better paths, ones lest strewn by bodies.” Without knowing the cause Hezran could hardly hope to improve the outcome. Without another hope he might still try.

“Even supposing it’s as you say and maybe, just perhaps, I actually have some machinations turning their gears beneath my face. What can you offer me as proof, all despite your doubtful nature?”

“Just bare words I’m afraid, though I’d hope you would believe—at the very least take them count.” They were all he had. Hezran couldn’t convey his memories in thoughts or images as with Reivyn, but just with words.

“Isn’t that contradictory to our say and nature?” They’d already gone over this before, Hal and him both.

“It’ll all go up in flames.” Most literally, after all Hezran had been there himself and watched it. He’d felt exploding winds burst the wings of freedom; even only standing on the fringes. “The night you’ve planned to steal into the hanger to take the ship away there’ll be a bomb planted in your midst—one fuelled by both old and new.” A contraption bound by timer and black dust as well as the white powder created by death and ignited by life. “The crater will be immense and the destruction absolute in rendering, especially for those fleshy globs closest to the casing scraps—I couldn’t tell you who they’re from. What I can say is that there is no way that ending could have worsened—a pointless loss that only hurt the innocent.” To him so many were innocent. He couldn’t help but think that most lost some sleep before the slaughter; that if they didn’t it was because of the roots that had sunken to strangle around their brains. ”And…”*that would be the second time I lost what was most precious.*

The first was that day so long ago Hezran could hardly remember except for vivid dreams.

The second was his resurfacing from the dust and debris after being lifted with his feet pointed back like a launching missile by the unforgiving blast of orange wind; seared and scarred and with a jagged stone slotted half way up his knee and one arm cracked and bent as the wooden segments of a puppet dumped down after being flailed in the air by an orchestra of tangled strings. He had been lucky, the walls had been blackened worse, and a cold chill had run down his spine as he had imagined the narrow misses of the blocks of stone and blades of steel scattered both behind and far ahead.

Had anyone still breathed? That was the only though he’d had as he had crawled his way back towards the crater’s depths beneath sirens’ blares. Slowly, ever so slowly, just as his vision had dyed with red, he had managed to reach another body still mostly left intact. That other solitary soul dressed full in dreadful black—the shadow that had tailed demise so close to have lured him with them—and a masked face now cracked. When the scars stared back at him dull and empty he had lost everything. He had ripped of the white stone laced around his neck—a precious gift from the one he had thought all but lost, now on the verge of losing once again. He had ignored the screeching wheels and clicking heels; the whirring engines and the raising barrels. To that pale glow he would have gladly given up an organ or a leg; even a heart or a brain.

Fading. Fading all away. Only a gentle leathered grasp had held him up to the end.

And if only that had been the worst. Until the third.

Vividly, like the thousand shades and colours dancing in the sky; those were Hezran’s feelings. Enough to surprise Hal without hearing any words; “so vivid one would think you’d actually been.”

“Maybe I have, or maybe it’s just been similar. Your thoughts are up to you, but I would suggest you hold back for a time. At least to let other forces try.”

“Try, and like to die.”

“As much as your own—the casualties will be less.”

“Then what is *your* plan?”

“I’d really like to believe it were all that, rather than a driven sort of fate—a play cast from another’s hands. Still I see no better route; no less will take us closest to our goals. To put plain—you’re not cutting deep enough.”

“Those words sound stranger coming from the mouth that speaks them. So, tell me how deep is your intent? Deep as blood, deep as bone, deep as drive. Who or what exactly do you intend to cut? Just fallen people or a fallen nation won’t be near enough–by all rights we’ve already fallen far too deep into the night. And how will we know if you succeed? How will they know that you’ve succeeded them?”

“Oh, trust me, they’ll know. More will know than ever before. More than housed by that simple floating land. ”

“I thought I told you that won’t nearly be enough. If it would have been I’d have cut the engines long ago. The people there might be but hated pawns, but those down here hardly form the dirt beneath their feet, let alone…”

“Then maybe *they* won’t be there.”

“You couldn’t possibly… If it’s that I’d rather take my chances. Even inside, at best the guard is far too thick. It’s impossible.” Hezran knew it far too well, just as much as Hal he’d lived there years and not once but till the very end had he gotten even close. But…

“Impossibility’s long overstayed its due.” This world was proof; his body was proof; the girl who stood behind him was proof. As long as something changed there was a chance; even if he had to wait until that very night.

“No…even then, it’s not enough. But how—“

Hal cut off midsentence, or maybe he hadn’t but it hardly mattered beneath the chilling screech that made it in—like a mouse tucked fallen beneath the ravenous claws of a stray starved lion.

That scream; it teemed more familiar than dread. *No! Why…why is she here…?* That had been the whole point, to keep her far away; to let her reach the starting line of a happier sort of life. And Reivyn…

“Reivyn!!!” She had already slipped out from behind and was half-way headed to the door before Hezran grabbed her; only by the hood. The cloth tore apart pierced by the black horn beneath that seemed to glow madder from the flames. “Reivyn! Listen! We need to stay here. We can’t run in now. It will only make the situation worse for her.” There was no way they could overpower them all, not that many. Even if they somehow did they would just be painting a giant target on their backs; especially Reivyn’s. If they knew about her there would be no rest.

She was enraged. Reivyn hardly heard his words, let alone his voice, and as she struggled her bracelet lit again—this time to a tad bit darker tone. Her arm twisted and turned beneath the cloth, grinding and tearing, taking a more miserable state than Hezran had ever seen before as it struck out at his throat—and soon the bulges made it seem her entire form might change the same. Grotesque and maliced. She wouldn’t listen. How could he get her to listen?

Out of the corner of his eye Hezran saw a murky glow. “What—“

He was too late; Hal had already made the shot. Just as before an earthy needle shot towards its prey and Hezran, unable to put himself in way, was left to watch it strike and watch Reivyn’s body fall limper to the ground.

“…Hal! What do you think you’re doing!?” His hands moved faster than his mouth. By the time Hezran’s sentence finished Hal had already been dragged up in the air; almost suffocating.

Hal dropped his stave to grasp for air. His other hand went to Hezran’s exposed arm tapping in hopes of relief, as his mouth gasped few words to speak. “You…shouldn’t worry. It’s not as bad…as it looks.” Just enough to earn a brief respite, though not enough to bring him back to ground.

It wasn’t until Hezran heard a muffled moan accompanied by light snores that the gap in air began to close. “Tranquilizer…?” Lodged into Reivyn’s shoulder was a shell of powder mixed with poison, less weighty for the weaker strike it gave and yet still potent enough to cause a deep sleep for its target that was meant to keep.

“So you do remember. I managed to sneak some extra from my rounds.” It had been a requirement whenever monitoring one of the scientific facilities, the so called laboratories of creation. Of course, the likes of them would never have been let inside—even those of greater standing were kept away to keep the city’s darkest secrets safe—though ears still heard and glimpses were still caught just short of seeing. They were allowed at least that much, even if only then.

“Sorry…and thanks for that.” Hezran let go Hal’s collar. He was still fierce from the suddenness and minor harm, but much worse could have happened; he supposed he’d have to be thankful for that.

Hal rubbed the red patch swelling on his neck. “You’ve torn my collar; looking clearly it could have easily been my neck. Now I know for sure…you and him aren’t nearly the same.”

“People are always changing, puzzling, whether it be in body or in mind, even if only by the tiniest of pieces.” It seemed at least one of Hezran’s worries might be put to rest…but he was curious. “What about me is *different*?”

“It’s not all good or bad. I’ve never seen him get so worked up, so driven. It’s not like he didn’t have will, but rather than fire he seemed more like a solitary iceberg floating in a crystal sea.”

That…might have been an ideal representation. At the time Hezran had thought that culling his feelings to absolute compliance was the only way to keep his hopes lie safe.

“Well, maybe there was that one time where you seemed especially happy, a small break in your constant stoic face, but even then it was if there was some disconnect—as if you weren’t sure as what to believe.”

Was that true? Maybe it was the flitting shadow he had seen on Everyn’s face. “That might be right…”

“So what’s your relationship with that one that came outside?”

“Just a girl—an orphan—we met along the way. She’s been a good friend, especially to Reivyn.” Would it have been better if they had never met? “Ahhh…honestly that idiot! And I thought we’d finally turned her all away.” It hadn’t been his intent, not to draw her in like this, but it was something he would never be able to take back. *It seems all these hands come touch is left to crumble into dirt.* “Can I count on you?”

“Well, now, that depends on exactly what kind of help you need.” Unwillingness; Hal had always been more of a tease. Or was he yet referring to the other.

“Fine. If you’re not willing to turn back from that fate of mine, could you at least do one thing. Make sure nothing too serious happens to the girl if she doesn’t make it through. At the very least keep from ending up in *there*.” That madhouse of madhouses where the living became monsters and monsters turned abominations.

“I suppose that much would be easy enough. Even if you hadn’t said so it’s not like I’m one to prolong the suffering of my own.” Hal picked his weapon from the ground and brought it up to shoulder.

“Oh, and try not to shoot her dead would you.” *I’ll come kill you by myself!*

“Ha-ha. Even I wouldn’t dare, not wide-up in front.” Right, even he wouldn’t dare, at least not so blatantly. “I don’t envy her.”

“That makes neither of us. But she’s not the type to break from this. …Hopefully we manage to find our way on up soon enough.”

“Hmmm…I wonder if that’s what he meant. I’d always wondered why he’d come to me. It’s not like I wouldn’t be the last person to want to beam on up; was never interested in paths or anything of the sort.”

“Who?”

“Don’t know, he seemed a little crazy at first, more than others; looked like he was half-way to death row—maybe he’d already been there at the end. But he did say something strange so I remembered: Where two mirrored towers meet at crests, there will the path be joined.”

The screaming from outside was cut off with a solid thump. They’d wasted too much time. Even if something needed to be brought back, that didn’t necessarily mean it had to be intact. ”You should hurry.”

“That’s fine I suppose, but there’s only so much I can tell. You’ll have to deal your way out yourselves.” There was no guarantee that others wouldn’t come in after, but…

“I don’t think you need to worry.” Their wait had left the flame to grow and by know it threatened to swallow the cabin whole, the heat unbearable. “The stage is more than set.”

“Ho, I’ll look forward to hearing how you make out.” Hal left with only the barest of sidelong glances, looking as much a devil in flame as the role he’d taken—the moisture of sweat clouding Hezran’s squinting eyes. As soon as Hal’s lagging step made it over the final frame the arch gave way behind him, leaving only the slightest liquid gap.

As Hezran lifted Reivyn from the floor he felt the cliff trembling from below. *In hindsight it would have been better if you were awake. No matter.* He flicked the hair out of Reivyn’s eyes. There was no point in regretting know.

“If only we could fly.”

“…Who knows, perhaps you’ll get the chance!”

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Frost

Lodis sat alone in an empty room before a single desk piled high with a seemingly endless stack of paper. One hand was cuffed to the table’s leg, while the other flitted with nimbleness and care across the surface. *Scratch, Scratch, scratch…*the simple motion massaged the stiffness from his shoulders and his brain, even as its rhythm began to lure him into a fragile sense of sleep.

*…Can’t sleep… Need to stay awake…*

How long had it been, since he been sealed away all alone without a single light to guide him? It was impossible to tell. Even his confinement upon return seemed like a vague memory. At least the food was warm enough. But he’d hear nothing since; not even from that girl Elsenlied.

How long would he have to wait? It was a question he had asked himself a thousand times, each time seemingly larger and more fearful than the last. At this point it was as if he could see the large imposing, death-blurred bold supplanting every inch of vision underneath his lids. And that was as much of a reason not to succumb to sleep as the other.

*Clank…*another meal…? No, this time the sound didn’t come from that smelly hollow that sat in front, but rather the frozen frame behind. The sound of the handle turning flushed him with relief.

“So you’ve come…” Lodis didn’t need to turn around. He already knew the answer. “It really is a beautiful name. Such a pity…”

A tingling sensation brought the beginning freeze up from the base of his spine. As the crystals formed his feeling vanished, first from his legs then creeping up. “And all this from a single shard…just as amazing as the tales they tell. I can image who gave you such a precious thing.”

“My will’s my own.” Even so a willing tool was a tool nonetheless…but perhaps he could at least let her have that much, though from the mild quiver of her tone there might still be some hope for others yet.

“I know very well… The Frozen Fangs, Sacred Claws of Ice; and one other name…Nilfinger: a touch of nothing, unfeeling. So tell me exactly…what is it exactly you feel now?”

“Anger…! Hatred…! Resentment…!”

“Are you sure that’s all?”

“…”

“Then perhaps we are the same.”

No response, just a twist of steel, cracking brittle partings amidst the ice.

“We both chose a scapegoat… And we both pursued the hunt; some way to unload our deep regrets.” The creeping encroachment began to choke his breath. Not long and he wouldn’t even be able to convey the words.

“Perhaps this will be a happier ending for us both… Still can you be satisfied with only this. If not for the world or a fledgling hope…for that very darkest of emotions we hold so dear.” Even only slightly, the freezing hesitated for a moment; just before his shoulders were encased.

“Here…“ Lifting his arms as best as he could passed frosty joints, Lodis grasped fragrant scraps grooved from painful force. “Letters. To the right a message old and warm filled with familial love and to the left the Silver’s darkest light to guide your dagger’s aim. Whatever road you choose to take…”

A moment’s hesitation, a standing part of breath and when the moment broke the ice had risen more than feeling.

*I suppose that’s an option also.* Lodis’s blue lips wouldn’t form the words. At the trailing cusp a stiffening crackle could be heard before silence made its lasting peace, the lonely assassin left alone to weep the dark.

--

Kinder Angels

*The bastards!* Even as she pushed wide the double doors their joyous blubbering and paper shuffling grated against her nerves. They wouldn’t let her get in a word.

Leaving the room her group fell in alongside. To her right an older, weathered man and on her left a younger girl barely left her teens.

Iris was angry. She wouldn’t show it on her face, but the clicking of her heels was all those close to her needed to know the truth. Enough to instil a caring paleness upon the other girl’s face. “What did they say?”

“Apparently those idiots made a mess of things down on the ground. They want us to clean things up.”

It was a nail-biting situation. Frustrating. In all likelihood there would be nothing to be found, just a simple search, but if something did turn up it would turn into a bloodier interrogation than simple capture. It was a noxious duty that she had no intention in subjecting her own to be a part of, though she supposed that at least with her in action they would be able to avoid the questionable ecstasies some of the more despicable wilders got about to with their dirty hands.

“Ah…sorry.” Iris had been lost in thought for only a moment and already at least half of those few in her charge were shivering at the bones.

“No…I’m the one who should be sorry. You’ve done so much just taking me on, I know there were probably better…” Always as timid as she was, the girl never thought she was much suited for her calling. Neither had any of the others, always teasing her and rubbing her in the dirt despite her birth. She was never able to see just worms. Perhaps it was only natural she would admire Iris so.

“Now you shouldn’t be saying that Elis. You made a promise, didn’t you?” The typical doting grandfather, ordinarily he would have long earned his place of rest, but he just couldn’t bear to leave the precious of his eye to danger on her own. He had even considered pulling some sway to have her switched to more general studies at one point but she had desperately begged him not to. Only a few days of her fight and he had already given in.

“Just that sweetness is enough. I’m glad I have you both.” Certainly, Iris’ mood had brightened. “I pray you never lose it.”

“Eh-he…” It took only a few simple words to turn that frown right upside-down. “But even so shouldn’t it be someone else. Your family’s quite famous isn’t it; you shouldn’t have to dirty your own hands.”

“The smallest thing unusual happens and they’re practically leaking in their seats. They didn’t want to cut any corners this time which is exactly why they wanted someone with standing, someone with more to lose and an image to keep. My *parents* were all too eager sign off on it as well and I can’t exactly turn them down.” Besides the factors of her inclination and how she failed to appreciate the wealth of difference and standing between the proclaimed superiors and inferiors.

“Well you can trust us to keep our lady safe. Isn’t that right Elis.”

“That’s right. Grandfather and I and you. Together we can do anything.”

Iris really had been blessed. Now if only she could get some others to start thinking this way.

--

Letter

*My dearest Elsie…*

*Perhaps I should be calling you Elsenlied after all this time. You’ve probably long grown up since I saw you last. Still, I always remembered how you loved that name. It’s too bad that if you’re reading this I’ll likely never be able to call you it again. I can only hope you might forgive me…*

*I’m sorry I left you and father stranded on your own. I know it was for our good, never heard a beggar and his family being married into wealth before, least from the scruffy side, though those days I doubt that you’d remember. That would be good.*

*I just couldn’t bear being in that house any longer. It was far too big and musty for me, even just in that single dungeon room. At least we got to eat; but I’m sorry I was weak. The starvation was too much for my lonely soul.*

*Every day my only thoughts were how to break free. It didn’t take long for them to take a darker tone. Oh! How often I thought of killing her! Still, her blood would have stained your clothes.*

*I had to go somewhere higher. Somewhere where her whip had no hope of reaching, and that’s when the idea struck. I’d become a knight; a noble of my own right. The council held its people well; no doubt they’d lend their ear.*

*The training was tough… Tougher than I’d thought. Maybe it was just right. I’d had fortune in good friends and leaders. Though there was a sniff of something foul it hardly mattered, they held their promise well to keep you safe, at least from what they told and showed…I was hardly allowed to see. Ard, I hoped nothing bad happened to you behind my sights!*

*She probably knew, but I doubt she would have told you. Maybe you even hate me by now.*

*I’m sorry.*

*At the time the only thing I could think of was getting away alone. If I had told you where I’d went I knew you would’ve followed and the last thing I wanted was you to be caught up in some stupid war. It suited you much better to play with dolls.*

*Your memory,*

*Heathen*

*I’m sorry dearest brother…* It was already too late. The scars would never go away.

--

Life

Hezran woke up numb; his body’s aching and mind’s swirling dulled by the expanse of snow that had embraced him from below; the only warmth that touched him from the fragile body that embraced him from above. A sticky sort of ice could be felt clinging to his head and his back below as well, as if to stem the flow of time.

They had fallen so far…so very far. The hook-nosed cliff that had lain above now seemed as straight as the wall that had birthed it, showing a silver lustre at the very top where cracks still shook occasionally slinging new stones down to tumble on the ground mere meters from their resting place despite Hezran having tried to jump so far. Reivyn would likely have had his head for his actions too if she were awake.

Still, no matter the fall or the quakes, Reivyn made her quiet breaths, branding him piece of mind along with the tiny worm of thought that Hal might have given a sleep just a tad too strong.

But at least they were alive. Hezran’s muscles burned as they squirmed to raise them from their shallow grave, but at least there was still that. And as crystal shards and blood-red icicles dripped and cracked restoring the warm familiar flow to Herzan’s veins and shattering the clench of bony chains on broken flesh…time restarted once again.

--

Death

Wheeled in upon a wooden block undamped, was something covered and bound by cloth still cool to the touch. From her seat where she made her strokes the woman waiting painted tarnished scenery, a picture of entwining souls and malady still bright and hopeful despite its falling colors.

A fragile, thorny flower the artist very well might have been insane and her visitor knew in full the terrors waiting any foolish courage that dared to interrupt.

A smirk and snicker from the board; a final stroke of splashing red accompanied by exuberant delight. “Ah…?” Immediately the peaks that curved turned upside down, a quick flap of muted winter cloth left the painting covered.

With a clothed hand scoffing to the side in flush, it was a moment before she turned back round face again. “Good work.” A moment left to mere imagination, that commandeering tone never having changed one bit, making wonder of the truth.

The lady wasted no time in moving to her package.

A slip of glove and the slightest brush of hand left both tether and cloth undone; revealing the gruesome statue that lay beneath. Only then did a brief twinkle return to those lingering eyes, before a deeper frown returned. “He’s cracked.”

The deliverer knew full well, after all she was the one who did it, with her own hands. “I-I apologise, my lady!” A cold sweat ran down her neck. She remembered the last displeasure, a brief the image that would never let forget—flesh and bone reduced in whole to ash; swept away by wind’s most fragile touch.

Gloved hands clenched once, then twice beneath their owner’s hollow stare and then… “I suppose I’ll forgive you just this once. A broken piece remains a piece of art all nonetheless. Once brushed up…yes I think he’ll make a fine addition to our little family.” Every piece of wood, every shard of glass, every scrap that remained beneath her touch…they were all part of her family, all beautiful in her world until returned to nothing. And then they were simply that—nothing. That included the sobbed girl turned dirtied knight as well.

*Could her ladyship…?* Engraved suspicion carved by words. Ignorance would have made it easier to forget. A humming tune of deadly innocence, the lady would certainly have had no trouble pulling it off; that being said…*doubtful.* It was a perverse sort of trust. For all the sheer callousness and brutality that her owner displayed—all in spite the tellings of the emboldening crimson the lady would surround herself with—that presence never saw a single drop of red.

“So tell me, was it pleasant?” Still for what that question searched was something those eyes refused to show. Would Elsenlied’s answer be the right or wrong; knowing no lie would be forgiven.

“Not particularly…”

“Why not? It’s alright to show excitement. In my case if any other were even remotely involved in harming any one of mine I would not hesitate a moment; I would feel singular delight once known they were utterly and completely destroyed, not a trace or squiggle left upon my canvassed stage.“ Elsenlied didn’t blink even once as the lady’s untouched hand came to caress her face so tenderly as if to scoop from feeling; such as would please her. “Ah! Or is that it? You wanted smash his popsicled body into a thousand fragrant shards and ground them to the dust. But you can’t it’s my piece now.” A thankful misunderstand topped brutal imagery considered darkly once before, but no longer. With childish cruelty, her ladyship was not one much for pity, though Elsenied had to wonder what events had made her so. That passiveness in nature and obsessiveness with family.

Elsenlied didn’t mind. Hers had already broken—it’d just taken her far too long to realize. It was enough to see the lady smile, even as nefarious. But…

“Well then my lady, I’ll be taking my leave.” A curtsey as deep as ground framed Elsenlied’s stillest face.

“Oh. And where do you think you’re going?” She had just gotten back. Shouldn’t the family stay together?

“…” There was no way she could answer; say she was leaving for good. If she did she would end just that, the subject of yet another twisted experiment of misguided salvation like her captain before her. And she didn’t want to make the girl cry. But what could she say?

“I’ve asked her to serve me for a time.”

Elsenlied froze in place. As an apparition he had appeared beside her, all despite the bulky steel that covered him head to toe, not even leaving a glimpse of skin visible beneath the face.

“Why, if it isn’t our dear and nearest Silver Knight. I thought we’d had several talks about the use of my things? What’s more you would dare touch her despite my absence.” The glove came off, the caress more venomous than a loving snake. As her lady brought her hand up to the towering mask Elsenlied winced reciprocal, expecting the inevitable degrade…

But it never happened, and it seemed her lady only knew it far too well. Turning her hand back-face she struck across the helm to a heavy clunk, leaving her side the only reddened. “I suppose it can’t be helped… I pray next time you consult with me first.” There were tears in her eyes: Pain. Sorrow. Happiness? That strongest, cruel princess seemed captive by silver chains.

What could she do? Was it really alright to leave her just like this? Elsenlied thought of reaching out; and so she did and would have touched if not for the cage of steel bars that chose to block her way.

“Go.” It commanded her, but not without a glimpse of mixture similar to the other side. Human feelings were so complicated. Elsenlied had a feeling that only those two could hope to understand.

--

Fragile Shelter

“Things are really starting to turn up.” Kale looked up from his hammer with a sweating brow to see Helen with a cold pitcher in her hands.

“Thanks…” It wasn’t easy boring spikes into the rock and he was starving for thirst, but downing the cooling drink only served to convince him further of the necessity to give some structure to their haphazard construction of a community. “If we are going to be here for a time we had might as well make it liveable. Who knows what’s happened to our old homes in the meantime.”

It hadn’t been easy to leave and it had been even harder to come to the threadbare hollows that had awaited them, despite early-comers’ efforts to provide welcome and rest.

“Tell me, how are the others?” Hal couldn’t help but feel at the beginning there had been more around to sweat beside him, or at least to make some noise. Sweat helped whet the spirt and the lack of activity was worrying.

“There are more and more unsettled. After all, it’s already been a week.” Helen had little in words of comfort to offer. Even her own eyes were dulled by black circles from sleepless nights. Even so her face was a sight for sorry eyes, as though her eyes might droop from sleepiness, her smile never wavered. She was the glue that kept them all together.

Ever since they arrived in this deep dank cave a storm had raged outside, almost as if the winds themselves would try to keep them away from home…and trap them to an eternal icy cell. Fortunately, though it was cold, the tall stone walls kept them from the worst and in day there were enough cracks from up top to spread a dull light through the cave, though still sheltered from the snow. Mysterious shards of crystal scattered across the rock glowed as dispersed suns and moons when their times would come, a small comfort, but enough to lead others to find those closer to the ground to keep close to chest. The weathered lines of symmetry that ran across the dome also served a distraction for a time, more so as the parents chased their youths who felt compelled to play among the many rising hollows no matter how they scolded.

In any case it might have been inevitable. At first there was novelty but the gnaws of worry had already sprouted roots.

When could they return? Would they be able to return? …What would they be returning to?

The constant whistling only made things worse. Some would say it whispered in their ears—called them out to shore. Back to their wood-bound homes amongst the free and open-air and away from the flimsy tents and shacks that barely stood enough to withstand the constant drips of moisture dropping from the encasement that seemed to encroach above.

“If only we hadn’t lost some to the storm…” The siren of Helen’s own heart called her out. They’d left with all and arrived four less. If only the storm hadn’t kept them at bay—for some it wouldn’t, without firm claws to keep them locked inside to keep their lives.

“Don’t blame yourself. You know as like as I that they made their choice.” There was always the chance they could have simply slipped; but it was better—perhaps worse—if there was a hope or purpose that had driven their loss. If only it could be so simple for him. He had to show her strength. “There’s no choice but to wait either way.” The message Lodis had left to spur reuniting was short, shared of dubious nature and full of uncertainties, but it was a scrap of hope nonetheless. And with luck they might find the essence of their search as well.

There was still time. They could only hope the wind would die down by then. And hopefully then, they could finally get some answers.

--

Foreshadow

“How was it?” The old soldier and the squire were waiting by the door.

It was finally time. From the scraps they’d gathered the messenger would visit soon and from them they could hope to gain little more.

“A complete waste. They knew just as much as we do; didn’t seem like the type to know directions even without a white blanket with scattered green tops looking near the same wherever you would start. The eyes had even covered as to the route. Whoever orchestrated the whole affair must have had butterflies on their mind.”

“I suppose the girl they caught before didn’t serve any better?”

“Even less so; she had tighter lips for one.” Iris cracked a grin. “Not that that would save her. After a little peer into her mind we’ve learned at least one thing—someone knows. I bet those fools are wishing they’d invested in some clarity now instead of spending all their time with mangling bodies.”

“That must have them all in panic.”

“But I can’t imagine it’d mean much in the long run? I mean it’s not as if a single person can stand up to Freyr’s arsenal, let alone the one’s we hold below…” Elis was nervous in imagining. Just what would happen if they could do something and knowing of the truth.

“That would be the truth. Or so they claim to believe with quaking boots. But really Elis you need to think a little deeper. I’m sure your grandfather could already tell.”

“Harumph…” It was something that would rather be kept quiet, especially in the wake of prying ears, though more importantly taking into account the girl’s presence.

“What!? Is there something wrong with how I’m thinking?”

“No, it’s perfectly sweet and innocent, just as I would expect of you.” This laughter, it’d be better if it never went away. “The thing is ordinarily it would be impossible for one to know when these…harvests…would occur. You’d either have to be someone directly related to the deployment or a high standing member of the king’s council. So either someone close is feeding numbers or this certain person on the ground has a very special crystal ball indeed.” Iris paused in step. “I wonder which would be more fearsome.”

--

Finding Bearings

*Any luck.*

*Not yet.*

This is how it’d been for them day in, day out, ever since recovering from the fall. Not that they were able to do much at first with the cold and the blizzard, but at least once Reivyn had woken they could keep travelling in a globe of warmth for small breaths of time. The farther their path melted into the snow, the more that seemed to fall and the more of it that survived to be packed into refrozen ice the harder it became to see differentiation in their surroundings. Each time, eventually they’d been forced to retreat back into the small hollow they had found before that burning night, left abandoned by unknown beasts, where they had stashed some food to keep cool amongst the cold with the scent of pungent incense to keep nature’s thievery at bay. They had only been able to pack so much, however, and the smoke only lasted so long before some hungry animals dug into the scraps, though at least then they had a small store of fresh meet for a time.

Grumble… Ah, how Hezran wished he could escape from the stifling white and find some warm spring into which to dip his sore and frozen feet. Warm meat—perhaps some thin stew and a few chunks of bread at the side. Was it too much to ask for? Hezran could almost taste it now, the melting fat…

*I’ve found it!*

*Uh…! Good, I’d almost feared they’d taken that as well, not that I’d imagine it’d be very delicious them—far too splintery. But these should make the journey easier.* Two pairs of wooden frames linked with wire. But it was more than just that, it was a sign that they hadn’t been completely given up on and that they could not completely give up on them.

There had only been so many pairs to begin with, just enough to keep the village floating above the worst of snows. There had been none to spare, and it was something Hezran would never have known he needed until pulling through the leather straps himself.

After what he had done they could have very well left him to his hardship, if not Reivyn too. But they had made the active decision to leave a hope behind—a hope for meeting, and with it a hope that perhaps Hezran wouldn’t leave a hated ending once again.

Seeing the brief *X* attached to the note that had been left with their supplies Hezran had wondered if they would be able to find the snowshoes; feared they wouldn’t be left behind—not for someone like him. Every day that passed that image grew more paralyzing. It was necessary—he knew it was. He hated his own betrayal. Though—

*Oophm...!* Delayed by his thoughts Hezran hadn’t the first to start moving and so he had avoided being the first to fall. Looking just nearby he saw Reivyn spread like an angel in the snow.

As he took his first few steps to reach her, Hezran realized just how easily it would have come. As Reivyn warbled, pouting in her frame of white, Hezran leaned stiffly to grab her hand…only to have himself exchange places and realize full well once again just how much harder it was to get back up alone.

They couldn’t help but laugh. They couldn’t help but smile. Alone, stuck in a cold pit of dread, there might have been tears. Together they could share in the pain and lessen it, find amusement, and in knowing that if both should fall they wouldn’t be alone, have peace in failure.

These wings would take some getting used to, but they were not alone. No triumph comes without its effort and no prosperity without its trial. And with their own two pairs of feet, maybe they could reach the others’ hearts.

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Measuring Rage

“Get a sense of the world first, he says! It’s not like the world makes much sense in the first place. So how did I end up back here again?” From the fuming train to stamping balls of slush to packing ice. “Saying I’m on the right track but my anger rides derailed; that I need to open my eyes and vision wider. Who does he think he is!? …Well at least I know better now.” She had chased her brother half out of anger and finding him dead before she even reached him had only left her shackles loosened and the door spread open for the beast.

That she was here now. It was a reminder that even the words of the dead could still be soothing.

“Now what will you do?”

--

Roar

*There’s something up ahead.*

*Hmm… Stop!* Hezran put out his hand to the side to keep Reivyn from moving forward, before pulling them both behind the surface of a nearby aspen. There was a problem.

Though the snow had died down for the most part and it was still hard to see, amid the specks of falling white Hezran had thought he saw the occasional dot of black, which could have earlier been put down to a yearning slight of mind or lesser harm. If it weren’t for Reivyn’s warning they could very well have made a fatal mistake. They were only fortunate they hadn’t been spotted yet.

If she could sense them this far out that meant one of two things: something wilder, or something worse. Hezran was tempted to call for the latter; after all, he doubted such a methodical giant would have been missed along the original path of the village’s flight.

*Stay here and keep quiet.*

*You’re going alone!?*

*There’s no time to waste. Who knows when the others might arrive? If they’re caught that would mean everything we’ve done the past few weeks was utterly a waste.* The fact that they had even been traced this far meant that the enemy knew enough. All they needed was a single thread to tug them to their goal and Hezran was not going to let that happen! *Keep an eye out for me will you.*

*Fine… But I can’t promise I’ll sit still until the end.* The more Reivyn spoke her mind the more rebellious she seemed to become. He wondered if it was her nature or from the examples she had had to learn from.

*Then at least keep it till the last moment, when the situation couldn’t be more hopelessness.* If there really were no ways out then she might be the only one to save them all.

It was with those thoughts that Hezran inched himself closer to the ground, burying himself in snow. *Brrr…!* *E-even if I was start-ting getting used to it…this c-chill’s too much.* As much as his body he felt it slow his mind—but there was no time for that. He had to get closer.

Elbow by elbow he crawled forward, the powdered cloak he wore serving a patchy sort of camouflage—not perfect—if they really cared to stare they would see through it in an instant.

*To the left! Hide!* And that’s where she came in. Even if the owners were inclined to purpose that didn’t mean their tools felt the same. As long as Reivyn could communicate with her peers they stood at stark advantage.

*Four…is it?* Now that he had gotten closer the blobs began to separate. *…Well I’ll be damned.* One of them was a familiar face; extremely regretful. He really didn’t relish getting involved.

One of the shadows raised its arm, as if pointing to something in the distance. Following the point Hezran’s gaze ascended towards the hills and mountainsides where he thought he could make out a few more blots of color descending closer.

The others confirmed the situation just as soon as him, checking their equipment before they set off into a run. There was no reason for them to hide; better to just get it over and done with quick.

One man stayed behind to watch their backs with a lackluster expression, beating a hand to his mouth. Like a bullet Hezran darted from his cover crossing the short few feet that kept their distance. He had to thankfull for the sleepiness; Hezran doubted it would be so easy to get a knock on the man if he had been at full alarm. Three quick jabs: the diaphragm, the center of the neck, and across both sides of the head. That was all Hezran had time for before chaining to the next.

He wouldn’t stop. An old man, he was skilled, but light from age. A younger girl, weaker, she’d be light. Finally he reached their leader, noble and quick with her ebony hair streaming back like an emblazoned flag beneath the tumultuous winds… She wouldn’t be so easy.

Even without seeing behind she knew; Hezran wondered if she could sense the push of air. Their arms clashed together, her left blocking his right as she brought up the second with stave in hand. A roar of a blast split both his eardrums and his form. Frantic as he was to roll away, Hezran couldn’t avoid losing a clip of leg.

*Guh…!* It stung, it hurt so much. Nerves burst and roasted with the touch. He’d never been able to get the drop on her, no matter how he tried. For every step forward he took, she took four, and as a foe she was only all the more imposing. Even now, without the sharpening of Hezran’s own extra spade of time, she never gave an inch. She stood strong as a steadfast, iron wall before him; impenetrable and immutable.

It only hurt him that those unwavering eyes with their hidden hints of warmth stared so coldly at him now; threatening his annihilation. The wind would take his hood; he needed to keep it down.

*Rumble…!* His stomach could never make a sound so loud—dreadful—such that only one with the experience of having nearly weathered could know well. Nothing good. He thought himself mad for thinking it was worth it to get a glimpse of sweat and uncertainty imperilling Iris’s steel face.

It came so fast, the mountain god’s unending rage; he had barely room to grab her hand. Swimming against this tide…was impossible. There was a tree that creaked. At the very least he‘d do his best to keep them surfaced until the end.

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Think/Act/Feel

“What was that!?” From the place of their descent they heard the loud blast echo. Almost instinctively they moved to put some distance between, running parallel along the mountain ridges. And it was a good thing they did for that instant…

*Rumble…!* The mountains shifted as an ocean of sea and ice came free, burying and merciless as it swept down towards the plains. The brutal brush reached even as far as them, but they had managed to get far enough away to avoid the deepest and most forceful of the tides; where they could grasp tall, proud trees that served as suitable anchors against the rush. It was the debris that flowed inside the snow that proved most painful.

“This is why I didn’t want to come back to these mountains!” Cull gritted his teeth painfully as the last block washed through. Disasters of this magnitude certainly weren’t an often occurrence. There was a reason the village was placed as far as it was, where the most they would usually get was a light dousing—at worst frames might shake. Even just the ensuing image left behind was enough to leave a terrible impression.

“Has it stopped?” He could hardly see above the snow, but with the only shaking being that of his body from the cold, through some difficulty Kale was able to lift his legs back above the snow. They had been lucky all considered; and a familiarity with the surroundings had certainly helped.

“This is just another reason why we can’t stay long.” The third’s words weren’t in reference to the freshly driven white that had retouched the already fading color of his beard, but the hollow they had only just recently left. At least on the inside they were sheltered, but the question was what would happen should the path was buried. How long would it take to dig the way out?

“I don’t think that’s something we need to worry about this time at least.” Their hiding spot was far enough away they’d taken the trouble of circling around; and of course, at the elder man’s request. “Seriously, why did we have to bring him along? …Shit.” Cull didn’t want to say that he was stuck. He’d rather stay her until snowmelt rather than ask for one of the others’ help.

“Say that once you’re able to stand up properly on your own two feet. There’s more to consider than just any single occurrence that comes to mind.” Wisdom of the ages it would seem, and of one already faced of death for many times. It had only been a while since the retired soldier had taken count of his wounds and he was already ripe for action. “And I have a name boy. It’s Fontaine. Use it.”

“I know that! …Dammit. Help me… Please.”

“You only needed to ask.” Easy as pie, all it took was a single hand for the unsteadiest of them to be made equal with the rest.

“Still, since you’re one of them I didn’t expect you to come along. Thought you’d be cowering, pissing your pants with the rest of them.”

“Indeed, there might have been some leakage the first time. After all, I hear the first thing that goes with one’s death is one’s bladder’s hold. But here I am wide awake again. I didn’t expect the boy to be so soft.” He was the one who had denied the strongest and his strength had given the others hope to stay, even if it turned out to be for nothing in the end. Still, he was a rational man, he would not fight against what had ordained. With things played out as they did he would merely start over again, thinking from this new position—no need to dwell on the past. And so he’d taken up the mantel of leader for the growing displeasure and rallied—subdued it—both for those who at first wake thought they might slip away and the others who later grew tired of the wait. His aim—was still unsure; at least it would seem. “I came to make first contact, whatever that might mean. Do you truly believe you could keep the angry down by suffocation? Sometimes you need lead the gates on lightly—at least leave a small gap so they can see.”

“And then they’ll get their hands right in the grooves and force it open. A stampede of feral sheep ain’t nothing pretty to the sight.”

“That’s what chains are for my boy.” Chains that take as many forms as one could possibly imagine: Here there was trust, maybe a bit of hope, along with an entire dash of fearfulness and leaving it up to others.

The glaring just wouldn’t stop from fiery youth and steely wisdom forging on; one smiled, one grimaced. So what about the apathetic…

“It’s fine if you’re both too wrapped up in each other right now to care, but there are bigger things to worry about. One way or another, our messenger may have gotten swallowed up in all that.” And if so it was hard to imagine anything less than zombie crawling its way up from underneath. Something similar to a pale hand scraping against one’s leg from underneath; hungering beneath layers and layers of sheets of ice. Something like…

*Scratch, scratch, scratch…* Kale’s entire arm became stark white with bumps more frequent than a rocky road. He thought he just felt the sensation of fingers brushing against his leg…and they had long nails to boot. It was enough to set his spine atingle; shut eyes bracing for a peek. Was it just his imagination or were the strokes gradually getting limp?

“What are you waiting for!? We’ve got to dig them out.”

“For once we might agree on something boy.”

It didn’t take long for Kale to realize of what they were speaking. Along with their gloved hands clawings Kale brought out a compact shovel he had thought to bring along. By the time they reached the shoulder, the arm had freed of motion. Soon they reached the head, an unfamiliar face to them, frozen as the tears. It wasn’t good.

Briefly, Kale put a finger to her neck before as he continued to nudge away the snow, careful not to harm the body. There was still a pulse, though slower, like molasses flowing from a jar. She still breathed yet and by the time they had completely unearthed her, her temperature had fared the worst; and it was still far too cold outside. Kale began to strip his outer layer…

“What are you doing!?” Worry, it was something Kale had once never thought to hear again from his son.

“She needs warmth.”

“But…we don’t even know who she is.” What about yourself?

“Since when were you scared of one little lady.” Fontaine clapped Cull’s back hard enough to make one think of shattered bones.

“That’s not what I meant.” In the first place it hadn’t been the real thing he had wanted to say, but rather the only thing he could say at the time.

“It’s not going to do her any good keeping cold out here. We need a fire. Someone needs to bring her back.” And Kale would have done it himself if not for the other hand that clasped his own to stay.

“And that’s exactly why you need to keep your coat.” Instead Fontaine took off his own. Aged as he was, those muscles were no joke and the bulk helped him fair better in the cold. “Let me do the honors.”

The familial two were caught by surprise; too shocked to speak. It was certainly something they had never thought he would offer.

“How do you think they would react if one of you two were to bring yet another unknown into the equation after so highhandedly forcing them into hiding and retreat? Though I’m sure there are those who wouldn’t mind, at least my people would no doubt label hypocrite. It’s not something we can afford right now. Solidarity is important, even if we’re at each other’s throats. At least if I’m the one to bring her back they might see it as a sort of small rebellion. It will help to keep them calm.”

Put that way it seemed that they had little choice but to accept. “…I understand your words. But what about us? There’s still a lot of unknowns—possibly dangerous—out here on our own. That and no doubt there will be displeasure simply because you weren’t there to keep an eye.”

“If that’s all why don’t you let me help?” Yet another unknown entered the scene; or rather than an unknown she was an unexpected. “Seriously, now I’m glad they told me to keep watch from a distance. Not that I could see much anyway.” Though the magnifying instrument that slung around her neck was something.

“See, doesn’t that solve things well enough?” Even if he left they would still be a group of three and given the new addition’s background there would be little doubt of authenticity.

“I suppose. Though…” Why was she here too?

“Elsenlied, reporting for duty! Though I don’t know how much longer I’ll have a band to be considered part of.” Coming here might have been the final straw. She’d already spotted some things to cause her doubt.

“Seems like you’ve calmed down a little. Then I’ll be leaving this to you.”

“Aye aye, sir.” Her salute was a touch more honest than before. More trustworthy and more measured in her thought.

Turning his back to the group Fontaine trudged solidly and swiftly up the slope, soon disappearing beyond their sight.

“I’m surprised. I thought it’d be that other knight or no one.” Cull was the first to poke his doubts, if a bit sharply.

“It’s not that I’ve given up my anger. I just plan to go about things a touch more logically from now on.”

“Still, I wonder what happened to the other.”

To Kale’s off-hand question Elsenlied turned her face aside. “Who knows? Perhaps he’s frozen stiff.” It wasn’t something she was ready to discuss quite yet. “…Shouldn’t we be moving on?”

“Right…” Kale wasn’t fully satisfied but he supposed it have to do for now. It was more important to search about the snow. It would have been an ironic death to say the least, but Kale really doubted such a person would fall so easily.

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Beneath the Ice

*Brother!* A small hand chasing after a large back in an even larger house. The door was open, white light filtering in to blind all the surroundings except for those fleeing lengths of hair. Those shoulders turned once—there was probably a smile on his face—she couldn’t see the eyes, or say whether he was truly sad or happy, but she would never forget the warmth of that final hand. And then, just like that, he walked out the door taking the brightly shining light along with him; leaving her alone in darkness.

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Hollow Sky

The ice had hit him hard. He was buried, hardly able to tell the orientation from up to down. He’d swum in the waves as long as he could pulling her up with him. He could still feel her hand, limp besides him.

*I have to reach the surface.* But how far was it? He didn’t have Reivyn’s power of water to feel the moisture in the air. Nor did he have her fire that could melt away the ice. There wasn’t much for it…or was there.

He remembered something from way back when—when they were being chased by those infernal scorpions. He’d reserved it thinking it might come in handy. He couldn’t guarantee the heat wouldn’t melt him too, but now was hardly the time to worry about that. He could already feel his oxygen running out. If his brain shut down it’d be over for them; even Reivyn wouldn’t be able to search them out.

Fortunately he could feel a bit of air; rather than his head, it seemed to come from below his legs. Keeping one hand to her own, Hezran cranked his elbow down towards his upper pocket—he thought he heard a snap. The pain was excruciating, but he’d managed to take a grasp. He could feel his consciousness leaving him and then…a blast.

The last bit of wind knocked out of him he feared he would black out before the end, squashed to a bloody, burning pulp against the ice. But at last, when the pressure stopped and fire faded, what remained was a crystalline shaft of light parted by warm waters trickling down upon his face.

It was a beautiful sight… So much he almost forgot the peril of it all… So much he could almost…succumb to sleep… And still he needed to get up from his roost to free her. To set off once again…

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Peeling Deception

She needed to wake up.

She remembered an extreme rush of white. She remembered feeling an insurmountable pressure and immeasurable coldness confining her to Cocytus. She thought she might have felt it be exchanged, for an unstoppable blast of heat that washed her away in melt from those icy prison bars. The pressure vanished and she felt herself being wrapped in a bundle of feathered arms and rising as if she were a stranded soul being lifted by a solitary angel up to heaven’s infinite skies.

*Oh… Brother…* It was a rather beautiful, innocent dream; so unlike herself. Oh, how she wished she could go back to sleep.

*Rustle…rustle…* Her breaths had quietened and her feelings had returned. She could no longer go back to that pleasant dream.

And she woke.

What surrounded her were not the silky blankets of her much beviled home—these were much more scratching and itchy—but most comfortable all the same. As she felt her way through the furs and cloths that wrapped around her frame the fabric slipped and she felt a patch of a frigid air brush against her naked waist. Shivering she retreated back inside, slowly letting her head surface from the depths.

The first sound she heard was that of a fire crackling nearby, and that of a door creaking against the wind. At least she was inside and covered. But how did she get there?

Her head still hurt. She was dizzy. She needed to take deep breaths. Maybe she could open her eyes? It was hard to adjust to even that small orange light amidst of the darkness. She thought she saw a single line of black stretch across the waves and thought she heard the sound of coals turning over in their berth. It was old-fashioned, but it certainly had its warmth especially now. She wondered who it was.

Elis? Not likely, if even she herself had been downed so easily, she doubted the girl wouldn’t have been caught off guard or worse. Plus Elis wouldn’t know the first thing about starting a fire as such in this day and age.

Her old-old man? Now that was a different story. She’d heard he’d had quite the wild streak in his youth. There were some amazing stories; she’d have to get him to tell her them himself some time.

She sure hoped that both of them were safe.

Humming that unknown the rhythm, the depth seemed familiar, but not the same. Her vision started to return. Who was that?

“Y-You’re…!” That’s not right there was no face to even look at; she just had a brief memory of that robe, enough to shock her straight up and out of cover without a thought to looks. She couldn’t find her weapon.

“It went missing in the avalanche, though you’re free to look for it in time.” How did he know what she was thinking? He was probably lying. “Still, aren’t there things you should be more concerned about, not that I mind if it’s your inclination or whatever.” Bent back in his rickety woven chair the hooded darkness gazed her fully with a tilt; a little bashful.

It was more than just the weapon missing; she knew but somehow it never crossed her mind. She took her hands to her chest and legs covering them only slightly, but not ashamedly—that was her nature, or at least the one she showed.

Laughter spouted from the hood, neither derisive nor deriding; tinted with imagined memories and the matching of reality. It was warm. It didn’t feel like the kind of laughter that could come from someone who had set to kill her only moments’ wakefulness before. “You’re clothes are on the rack. They should be dry by now. It wouldn’t have done for you to go out in the cold all wet again.”

He had saved her. What did he want? Had he checked all the hidden pockets in her dress? She doubted it. She was the only one who knew all the places; except maybe those she had used them all against. But strangely when she went to check she found her robe devoid of edges.

He even sensed that small inkling of disturbance, laying his boots solidly upon a heavy crate—built from bulky wood and wrapped by rusting steel. “As for the rest I’ve found a handy chest of sorts. You’ll find I have the only key.”

“Who are you?” Iris was both mystified and disturbed; but strongest of all was her instinct for survival. Even as she cast calm words upon the dark, uncertain sea, she wound her muscles in preparation to fight and flee.

“Who knows? All you need to understand is that while I certainly don’t have any plans to harm you in any way, equally will I never allow you to strike me down. You may be my better, but I’m not quite as junior as you’ve known.” He had even already seen through that. “Don’t worry, I’ll return your items before you leave on back. For now I think both you and I are better served in searching. There’s still time—at least I’d hope. How would you feel left hanging underneath the ice?”

That was right! If they weren’t here, where had her comrades gone? They had certainly been behind her and she thought she had caught a glimpse before the flows. They had to have been washed away, and if so she could only hope not far. “How long has it been!?”

“A few hours, though perhaps it was a blessing in disguise that they were knocked cold before.” Less air would be used that way. ”Or a curse.” No strength to leave some sort of sign or dig from shallows to the shore, and less heat to keep them warm. “In either case: Does duty incline you give up right now?” He was already by the door and had taken up one of the long shovels that had been lain out against the wall. They had certainly been luckier.

She didn’t need to think. It wasn’t her duty to let them die here. She grabbed his offering without a moment’s hesitation, before they both set back into the snows.

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Heaven’s Feel

“Please take care of her.” Iris still remembered that moment like yesterday. He had been a kind instructor; not just to her, but to everyone even those that others whispered didn’t need it. Retired but decorated many times over her station. And now he was bowing to her, a young girl fresh out of the academy who had been given a position purely out of stature not her own. It certainly wasn’t something she was used to hearing without less than cordial undertones, leaving with her with an unusual sense of guilt.

“What are you saying, doter of a grandfather that you are? You’ll never leave her alone a single moment will you?”

“I will.” There had never been a doubt. From twelve to now he had brought his son’s daughter everywhere, free to walk on her own two feet but never far; always tethered against some malignant force at home. The girl was bright and well-liked, but sad and kinder for it. Both of them made quite the pair around the grounds. “Not even as I’m getting old, but the tides will change. I’m sure you know, there’s never any telling in how far or swift the winds will separate.”

And now hardly four years later.

*Oh, they came alright…*so fast she could hardly count a breath.

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Cruel Cold

It wasn’t much to go on, trudging out onto the open plains of white. If anything the mountains’ rumbles aftermath had left the wilds more pristine, both flat and clear, than the simple, silent, piling snowflakes could ever hope. Nothing could be seen beyond horizons and nothing could be heard for miles on.

Hezran pushed another stake into the ground. They were markers: to guide their paths forward and return. Until now they had been able to follow his prior footprints, but even those had begun to fade to white.

Iris sniffled not far nearby—she always kept a couple meters in-between—she braved it out well, but there was no hiding the climate’s toll. If it wasn’t the shivering or the occasional jerks, it could be heard through clattered teeth.

Chances were by now that nothing had survived. He knew it well. He thought to say it, but he couldn’t bring the words to mouth, seeing her expression and her steps. Even she probably knew it just as well. But there was a need for closure and as long as that was the case he would continue, placing his shovel between endless grains of sand knowing full well that games of cosmic chance would fair him better.

Perseverance you might say. But one had to wonder at what point perseverance stopped at that and rather turned to torture.

“I think I found something over here.” Maybe it was at the point of giving up…

Hezran followed over to Iris’s side. It looked like the metal had struck bare skin. There wasn’t even a bruise. It wasn’t a good sign. Still that didn’t deter her work, shovelling shovel after shovel, and so he joined as well.

In truth he had no reason of his own to continue to search. Even from this distance he and Reivyn were connected. As long as he could feel her presence Hezran knew at least she was safe. He even felt the touches of nervousness from their bond. As a good partner he should really have returned right away.

At this point he only stayed for Iris’ sake, as an emotional labourer for feelings he now knew but longer could act out.

Large piles had formed on either side by the time they finally unearthed the body. Stiff grey hairs turned close to white, a peaceful face—as if in sleep—free of terror as if he met his time relieved. Who knew old bones could look so beautiful?

He was stone cold. Breathless. Definitely dead.

It wasn’t enough. Iris had to grab the corpse by hand, bump the chest, breath cold air through a colder mouth. It didn’t matter. There was no spark left to ignite.

“Stop it!” It was hard to watch; harder yet to bear. “…Let’s bring him back.”

She slapped him. He couldn’t say he was surprised. All he could do was wait, until she finally let her tears flow.

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Stray Anchor

It was a strange swaying that wrapped around her surfacing consciousness. There were a lot of voices. Too many. There shouldn’t have been that many voices.

It wasn’t cold. In fact she could feel a warm heat emanate through her body and with a shift upon her forehead another weight and pulse spread out.

Her eyes felt a little damp and feverish. It was proof she was alive. How she survived or where she was she couldn’t know.

Perking her ears she couldn’t make out words, just measured scratches and then the sound of fabric flapping against air nearby. She was alone—probably—maybe now she could take a look. Opening her eyes, her gaze fluttered. There was a dull ache and her mind grew dizzy as she moved, more slipped, out from beneath her covers.

She felt herself falling. The distance couldn’t have been much but it was terrifying. Still she should have had a leg upon the floor, or something like it. The actual seemed a bit sluggish to respond and when it did come into sight it seemed a bit whitish, swollen, and stitched.

…And then everything turned white again. Mere moistness turned to tears and simple aches turned excruciating as mutilated balls of nerves and flesh ground up against a heated rock by a one-hundred-foot metal pestle beneath a giants hand.

She was going to fall again…at least she would have if not for another shoulder that kept her up.

“I wouldn’t walk just yet; it’s a rather frightful bruise you’ve got—such that count fortune you might have lost. Still the boulder did keep you close and surfaced; otherwise you would have lost much more…”

The pain was still too strong. She couldn’t think let alone put any thoughts to words, and the tightened bandages only made those feelings stronger.

“Just rest. And whenever you have the thought of sneaking out again remember, I’ll be watching.”

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As Strangers

“What am I going to tell her…?” Those were the first words that left her mouth upon return. About the him that they’d found cold to the her neither seen at all.

Hezran didn’t say a thing. There was no answer he could give. All he could do was watch her bowed over that warming corpse laid wetter from her tears than melted water, expressionlessly, unseen. They were strangers—that’s why she could cry, and that’s why he could let her.

“I’ll have to bring him back…” Where would she bring him back to? They had a home, but there family wasn’t much—that’s why he’d always doted on her so. If only…

*Scratch…* Hezran turned the coals again. “Changing the past…may be impossible. Carving out the future is something we commit to every day. All we can do is take our failures and weave successes next to come. If today wasn’t worth it, make tomorrow even better.” Hezran was never able to take his words in full. The most he could do was rearrange them for his twisted self.

“You sound just like him.”

Few words made him happier than anything. But him…who knew if she meant the same? “Care to talk a little more?”

Any other time, as any other person, in any other place, it was something that would never be considered. The non-existent wavering in her eyes would immediately subside for steel, a cold laugh, and a cruel statement. “My brother…”

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Wishes

He had always been her idol. He was smart, generous, engaging; always surrounded by friends and admirers, cast on copious praise and gifts from parents and principals alike.

He was the complete opposite of her: morose, timid, unsociable. She always had the worst grades of her group, was always chosen last to pair, and could never bring herself to give a word. Her parents left her alone and the others scorned her. A coal would be remembrance.

Only he was kind to her, and to her he was the sun. She would be content to daze in his shadow. The only difference was that while her feelings never changed, everything else about them did.

All it took was an instant. As the eldest son of a renowned family achieved fame in his own right the expectations could not have been higher; but equally more fragile. What would his coming of age bring? What sort of decision would be made of his future upon the twelfth year of his birth?

The houses hands were already burst from anticipations. Flowers had been laid, banners had been placed, pastries had been made, magicians had been staged, and musicians had been stayed. A magical composition likened to fairy-tale castles of candied dreams; Iris hadn’t felt jealous, just respect, wonder, and adoration.

It was the most tragic day of his life…and in turn for her.

Full of excitement she had waited. Warmth and smiles, that should have been all that was left, even though fighting sleepiness; but when those wide, tall double doors swung open late into the night and the firecrackers finally burst…there were only two hollow mannequins tipping through the door.

*Where’s brother!?* She remembered asking more frantic than she’d ever dared before.

*Who…?* She remembered hearing more emptily than ever returned before.

She pushed and she pushed. She wouldn’t accept. What could have happened in their short time been away?

A crack echoed across the entrance hall as she fell to ground. Stunned as stars as red blossomed between clenches of chipped ivory she still remembered exactly how cold her father looked, colder than he ever had before, repeating the words over and over between swirling, vanquished eyes as if by doing so her brother’s existence could be denied in whole. Her eternal nightmare that she carried to this day.

Ever since that day so many things had changed. No longer was she allowed to wallow in her mediocrity. Every move she made was watched with hawkest eyes. Any failure in performance would bring a scolding and the whip. Her father was especially brutal and her mother always watched.

Nothing was ever good enough. They may have never spoken but she was sure that none were hit harder by her brother’s loss—their shining angel that fell to Fallen.

As long as it was that she could understand. She was simply a replacement; one that could never quite break out of a greater shadow. She could even forgive.

The servant’s gossip even spread beyond her castle’s cage-like walls. Whether it was her peers or their parents she couldn’t block out the encroaching worms of words, squirming between clenched fingers through her ears. Pity. Derision. It didn’t matter which it was…no one was truly seeing her.

At times she’d thought just nicks and blades were nearly not enough. At times she’d thought to hang the noose…just a little higher. At a time like that—just so close to the end—so close to peace her sun finally returned, muddied, but still there.

On the night of her birthday, on the birthday of his sin, her bedroom’s window opened just as the final trickles of life were vanishing from her skin. It must have been a tall, hard climb. Nonetheless he came, too late but not irreversibly. He cut her free of her strangling chains of self. He had the same warm hands she always remembered; the same warm voice she never forgot.

To this day she still didn’t know how he’d managed, but from that day on he never once missed—that small salvation in her life. Each year after she’d wait so patiently and every time he’d find a way to sneak back in. Sometimes the others were simply away or asleep. At others some mysterious ghost caused some broken item that left the house a scramble. At times it even became a dangerous gamble. No matter what there would always be a single golden treasure, a ball of syrupy sweetness wrap within her hands.

It was something simple. It must have been something precious. She was happy enough with just presence, she didn’t need such things. No matter how she pushed he’d never take it back, even to the course of a sibling’s coercion. It always tasted far sweeter than the fanciest cakes baked earlier in the day.

They would spend hours and hours trying to make up for foregone time. He would always spin the wildest of tales, draw the scariest of faces, act the wittiest of reels. It would never fail to bring a smile to her face.

At least on the surface he smiled too. Was it just her imagination that his light grew paler with each meeting?

Whenever she asked his smile would only widen. It wasn’t as bad as he had thought, he would say. It was just a new place, with new jobs, with new friends. He was getting along fine he had said; while his past was irreversible his future was still something he had the power to control—to change.

*If you can’t change the past then change the future.* Somehow their meetings always ended with those words of comfort. Even now she wished she could have taken the hint as he ducked out early that last night and later morning she glimpsed blots of reddish brown upon the balcony. *If I had stopped him…* She knew there was nothing she could have done. When next she saw him his life would have burnt out leaving behind only a remnant coal for her heart. She would never see him alive again.

It was on the night of her twelfth birthday and her own coming of age. She had returned excited. Her results were good as well—enough to bring her parents rarer tears—but more than that it was for that one brief meeting in the year more important to her than anything else. As soon as she returned she shut herself in and opened the glass. Any other time she would have risked a scolding but now…they were too happy and must have felt generous in their vindication.

She waited all night… He never came…

Red in the eyes from yesterday’s exertions and a distinct lack of sleep she ignored the repercussions as she barged passed the recently woken maids and polishing butlers, straight out the door before her parents could be woke or warned. Dressed in nothing but a light and airy gown and her now mangled pristine hair, she rushed through the streets with such force and lack of care that soon once pristine, white fabric began to fill with soot and sooner other early risers forgot to turn their heads. Not even the guard at the gate showed much surprise as she walked through beyond: *Just another one.* In hindsight it was an incredibly dangerous affair.

*So this is the place of the Fallen*, she remembered to have thought. *Liar…* Even at such time of light it stunk of dirt and rust and drink. Those who stood upright like her were few and far between.

Glass powdering the ground slashed her feet leaving trails of red droplets as she ran. Only after coming so far had she realized she had no idea where to go. Under normal circumstances it would normally have ended for less than that. Clearly she had not been a right state of mind.

Never mind the slurring catcalls and unwanted touches, eventually she found some willing to speak with at least some touch of sincerity. Or rather they had found her.

As she had prepared to rush into the darkness suddenly she was lifted off the ground, dangling. She had struggled, kicking with her eyes closed against the unknown assailant. What was going to happen to her? she had thought.

It turned out nothing much.

Blacked out when next she woke she was in a creaky, moldy bed. Her feet had been moistened stingingly and bandaged with adeptness. In a small chair a slightish woman wearing a white coat tended to her nails with a white stick pointed out her mouth and a blooded metal pipe balanced at her side; she couldn’t have been older than her teens.

Suddenly Iris realized a sting and immediately her hands had gone for her head. There was really a bump, but it wasn’t bleeding. Scary! But she needed to move; quietly.

No sooner than she had wrinkled the dusty sheets than a clang rang out throughout the room. With a cold sweat Iris looked up. The woman didn’t look towards her, almost a picture frozen in place, but one thing had changed.

The woman’s iron rod pointed towards a nearby bed like hers—more a stretcher in a morgue of sorts. It was covered with a blanket so Iris couldn’t see the face, but the lump beneath clearly hinted at something more.

She didn’t want to see it. She had come so far she must have known but she didn’t want to see it.

With a deep breath she had reached out for the covering, pulling it ever so slightly, ever so slowly. A familiar face lay beneath; purple lips and deathly white but smiling none the less.

He had died of poisoned lungs and blood, something far too common in the slums. Anything and everything too dangerous, mucky, or unsightly were forced upon them as their lives. Living past the age of twenty was something cursed rather than welcomed for lack of luck.

Why did he have to die? She was tired, ever so tired. The next thing she remembered she had fallen deep again. Sometime in her sleep and tears a second woven sheet must have been placed on her—it was warm, still cold. If nothing else that scary woman was good at taking care of others.

Her hands clutched around her brother’s larger, still twice wide on hers even as they clenched with death. A feeling of the musty velvetiness of paper peaked against her finger from the gap within his grasp.

What could it have been…a letter? She was not sure she wanted to see. Even so she asked and as such received. It was a folded scrap of writing, torn slightly from the struggles, repatched with tape.

It was addressed to her—a single name written bold up front. The name of both a flower and a person and of a connection in-between.

What condemnations would be written within that smudge-stained surface? What sludge from the deepest darkest parts of his heart that never shown would lie within those crumpled pages?

Punishment. She was responsible. She had usurped his place and glory, clung on to him and never let forget. It took all her courage just to turn the pages to the message.

There were the same words he had always used and the same heart she had always known. A sound to push her forward and a reason to chase beyond the dying sun. At the very end, *You are my…*and below a radium of straight and trembling yellow lines surrounding a single precious, golden ball of sweet.

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In Truth

“Everything about those moments, the words we shared, formed the foundation of my life. I vowed that I would change things. I would make it so that no one ever had to suffer the same fate as my brother and that all the Fallen would have the opportunity to be treated as people.”

Now it all made sense. It was a monumental task; one that would be impossible to commit without upending the very foundations upon which that city lay. It also explained her kindness, the initial stumble she’d displayed when they’d first met at circumstances. From the beginning she had been free of the mindless antagonisms others had displayed—she had lacked the preconception of superiority and understood the pain of the inferior. It wasn’t Hezran alone that led a life full of dramatic changes, shattered in singular fells of swoops.

He had also… “I also remember a young man just the same, though he was older than me then. In the darkest hours of my darkest cell—even as he coughed up blood—he was like the sun.” Without them his mind could very well have fallen into the pits of darkness. “I’m afraid I’m not selfless enough to want to change the whole as for the better…but at least where I can reach, where I can see—I won’t let those I cherish be broken once again.” *Mutilated. Ravaged.* He’d already failed so many times since and even so.

“Then you should be with them.”

“Oh believe me, I always am. If only the body equally could split so many ways.”

That might have been the first time he heard her laugh as well; a kind of wispy, awkward chuckle from between her crimson lips, but laughter nonetheless. It was a beautiful sight. “Well then maybe you should try harder or at least trust a few extra hands. Don’t waste your time praying for the enemy. You’ll be hated.”

Enemy…it was harder to swallow than he thought. “No compromises. I’d rather not come to hate myself any more.” For now at least they weren’t at each other’s throats.

“I’d think you’d better pray to the Ardent that they might grant you some set of immortality.”

“More than you know… I already gave my word; I’ll have no plans on me dying just quite yet.”

He could stare at her face for hours. Only just stained by tears, her iron masked was stripped and glowing expressions revealed beneath. How jealous the others would be.

*He…ran…* It seemed his time was up. Reivyn was getting closer, any longer and the two would meet and that would only complicate things.

“Well, it’s about time that we part.” Hezran reluctantly let go of his chair. “I’m sure you will be able to get back just fine.” That’s what the transponders were for, and he’d left hers in the chest.

“We’re still not done yet.”

“I’m sure you’ve gotten used to it by now. Feel free to look around some more if you want but I doubt you’ll find good news. Sometimes leaving things to the unknown is easier on the heart. At least then you’d have the possibility.”

“Hypocrite!” It was true; he doubted anyone was so pure but maybe her. “…You could at least leave me back the key.”

“I didn’t really mean to stop you but… Let’s see, maybe if you could just forget all this strangeness on return—at least other presences perhaps.”

“That’s not what you said at first.”

“You’re right.” That didn’t stop him heading to the door.

“I promise.” Sweet, slight, but steady. Her promise might just be the real thing. Either way… “Where are you going!? Even I could lose my patience.” And she really would, but that was beside the point.

“What key? It was already open from the start.” Consider it his little spiting prank for last partings.

--

A Taste of Iron

She had been there back then too. After the explosion when he lost his sister to a coma he remembered surfacing mudded and frantic. There was a needle shot straight up his arm and a mask clutched around his face—clearly life-support.

That didn’t stop him from leaping up first thing and taking the doctor by the shoulders, shaking them with more might than he had known he had.

The doctor’s glasses shattered against the floor and the sound of creaking could be heard clearly beneath the red imprints of strangling fingers wrapped around his neck. The monitors lit up erratically, beeping with alarm.

It all felt like part of another upturned world and it was only her single iron fist that brought him back.

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Sleeping Pill

She stormed out of the hidden room half-mind to turn it all into the dust, her face tinged near as crimson as her dress.

“Is something wrong my lady?” Ever so calm. Since when had they been there?

It really wasn’t something she was intent on showing anyone. Normally it would have been the final fuse to set ablaze, but strangely she felt a sudden dullness, like a tranquilizer for the mind, evaporating all her feelings. And then she forgot.

“It’s been days and they’ve heard nothing back. They’re getting restless, even threatening.” Just seconds ago a pure shade of crimson, now her wrinkleless face seemed unnaturally serene and her eyes only just slightly clouded.

“It’s nothing to worry about my lady. Just a small interlude. Everything will turn just fine.”

“No! But…” It was a momentary struggle of assertion and ended ever so quickly. Since when had she lost control? She was in control. “That’s…right…”

“Perhaps my lady needs some rest.”

--

Reunion from Ice

“Is there really going to be anything this way?” The worries were understandable. They’d started from the early morning and without rest, or even food or drink, and kept walking along the tundra in hopes of something sticking out.

At the end they had no proof of possible efforts’ yields except for the non-existent words of one paltry little girl, drawing roughshod symbols in the snow.

“Do you have a better idea?” Cull’s snaps had begun fall flat. The rising moon seemed to call the lulls of sleep.

“At this point whether he’s alive or dead is out of our control. I think it’d be better we make up camp by now.” Kale was tired himself. It wasn’t easy carrying such heavy luggage all the time, but it was exactly for times like this that the extra effort was necessary.

Rest was a tempting thought, one that held sway over Kale and Cull’s exhausted minds after so many hours in the snow. Reivyn was definitely right and just not long ago they’d passed a frozen crevice that gave some hope. But for now, it’d probably be best to rest…

Their feet were the first to stop betrayed by nature. That would have been the end of it if all had come agree.

“Even if we stop she’ll keep going on without us.” Though she was reluctant, Elsenlied knew better than others how driven one’s search could be.

For some that would have proved more worry than for others. Kale in particular couldn’t bring himself to let a young’un go alone, so with the further prod of motivation and a shifting of his boots for comfort, he made the quickest in following.

“It could be a long time you know? It’ll be harder to set up once comes dark.” That said Elsenlied also knew the pitfalls that lied along that route and her words gave Reivyn pause.

“True enough. Maybe at least two should stay behind in preparation?” The other two were beginning to consider.

Reivyn might not have particularly cared whether they followed her or not, but Hezran would probably approve better if she brought them all in peace. Again she put her stick to the hardening snow. *He’s closer now…very close…*

“How far?”

*Just over the ridge. I feel. …He’s coming.* No sooner had she pointed than her fingers seemed to take a change in tone. Unable to wait a second longer Reivyn sprung on forward little hops of happiness present in her steps.

*Hezran! Where are you?* It must have been the thousandth time she called out amongst the empty space with a bare intangible feeling—their connection—to guide her on.

*Right here!*

For the first time she received a solid response—not just static nor emptiness. And beyond the sinking surface she spotted her partner—her Channeler, the voice of her emotions and her will as his also flowed back into her—climbing back on up towards her. It was strange, it wasn’t a feeling she’d been given but she couldn’t bear to wait those last few steps.

Backed by concerned mumbles left behind, Reivyn leapt from the top of the snowy lump. The fall was steep, though the landing soft. She trusted him to catch her, both now and ever, and he was not someone to let those precious blooms of expectation fail.

“I’m glad you’re well.”

There it was again. Reivyn remembered back to their brief separation after the flood events. She was alone, for once completely, it felt strange and though she had helped propel him forward, strange feelings stemmed from her chest.

As Mai had taught her words and writing, Reivyn wrote as best she could until some sense finally got cross.

*That…that might be anger. Angry because you care and were worried. That you wished they hadn’t even if they really needed to. Irrational, pure anger.*

She must have given a strange look considering how Mai had laughed back then.

*Right, maybe it’s a bit too soon. Tell you what…if ever there comes a situation where you feel that way again give him a good knocking—straight to the kisser if you can. I’m sure he’ll understand.*

From within Hezran’s caught embrace Reivyn raised her head and slammed it forward, connecting them at the fore briefly with a thunk.

It stung. It stung tremendously and painful tears pooled from her eyes, but just as Mai had said it felt as if something had let go and gradually the thoughts began to form. *I was worried.* Just as he had been for her back then, watching her burn up as he held her close.

Opening her eyes Reivyn flinched seeing Hezran’s head pulled back and come forward, shuttering instinctively once again. Her reddened skin was met with a light tap and opening her eyes once more she saw on his face, a truly happy grin. And…

“I’m sorry.” It was a real, human sight. United once again they felt their troubles washed away, hardly a care for suspicions that had kept while each other were away.

“So you are still alive.” Interrupting, Hezran certainly hadn’t expected to see Elsenlied so soon.

“So are you. And that you’re here I have a feeling what it cost. …I doubt he has regrets.” That was the kind of person Lodis had been: cunning, caring; a bit too duty bound, whatever he thought his duty was.

Some of the friction evaporated from Elsenlied’s face. Whatever she may have thought, attachment wasn’t something so easy to forget.

“You’re not the only one are you?”

“No, now that you mention it. The others were stopped by someone come to catch them. Something of a rushed order it looked—you could almost the steam coming out atop their heads.”

No sooner had she said it than Cull’s head peaked out above the hill. “There’s been a problem!”

“Kale?”

“He’s already headed back. With things being as it is you all might as well follow.”

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Mercy

“A complete disaster! What do you have to say for yourself?”

Not a moment she’d got back and Iris was already forced to kneel; not that she hadn’t expected. “I accept my responsibility. Losing lives there was no choice but to bring back what few shells were found back to the holy sky.”

“And not even half of them I see.”

“If only I’d known more about the terrain, this could have been avoided—“

“Blasphemy! There’s nothing on the ground worth knowing. Why you’re lucky we don’t string you here!”

“Now, now, my lords. There is really no need to be so harsh.” When had he arrived? It seemed as if he came from the wall, merely formed of shadow.

“B-but…” *But what?* those cold eyes seemed to state. Of higher standing only in name that the covenant’s crown was forced to bow. “If the King’s Right says…”

“But you needn’t bow your head so low.” There was a bit of relish to his tune. “There is some truth to what you say. How about this? We could just send her back to schooling, but instead let’s make her trainer. For all her blunders I hear she is quite good in practice.”

“Y-yes indeed, it is as you say. That should be fine.”

“I do hope you’re taking notes. It’s important that tools be put to use.”

“Right away!” You’d think they were all back in the classrooms themselves by the constant scratch of scribbles and their squabbling, though at least it seemed she’d fared the worst of it. She was as much dissatisfied with herself with the results; *if at least one more had made it back before.*

Less conference, more judgement; it was a tough blow to bear. It didn’t look like she would be grounded again any soon. There was still a chance others could have made it, and for that it was best she didn’t say too much.

And that the situation was still as good as it might be. Perhaps there was a bit of love left after all…

The King’s Right grinned. It was if he could see right through her. “Either way our moles have dug themselves around and seem to have found a trail. With things having dragged on so long, perhaps it’d be best we end it once for all.” The right hand nudged the chin with paper before bringing the roll down in one solid stroke. “Yes, I think that’s good. A two fewer are still more than well enough…”

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Holding Hands

“You’re back, thank goodness!” Helen was waiting at the very breach of entrance, frantic plight apparent on her face. “I’ve already heard a bit what happened. It doesn’t seem good.”

“How long has it been?”

“No one’s exactly sure…at least no one that’s willing to tell. Still Fontaine was able to get some word out of them. It seemed like it was planned for a while and the last anyone saw of them was late morning recluse to their beds when others woke. We probably wouldn’t have noticed so soon without looking to supplies. They were…quite generous with themselves.”

*So that tough bastard was still kicking strong,* but it didn’t seem like he had had any direct influence on the situation. It hadn’t been the first time that displeasures lazing spectre washed over the crowd; nor were they the only ones. Thinking about it logically those lulls were probably the moments where they drew their plans. “Is there anything else—a map or some drawing of sorts that might tell us where they went?”

“Nothing so conclusive, just a few scraps luckily left behind by fire with a few charred words. Chances are they left straight south and kept to the trees to avoid running into suspicion, so they would at least have been safe from the worst of nature’s wrath you faced. Provided the tools they took to work their purpose they should be able to avoid some starving beasts and then the closest outpost would be a couple stretches to the south. I’d say weighed down by luggage and lack of horses they’ll take at least a couple days.”

Days…it might be possible to catch them then, provided they weren’t caught by others first. “Who’s heading up the chase?”

“He had just come back but Fontaine left without a second’s rest. You should have seen them after he had his way. The rest aren’t likely to pull a stunt like this anytime soon.” If it was him at least Hezran could have some comfort. “I had thought he might wait…but Kale chased soon after. Will you try to follow?” Helen was almost pleading with her words.

It was a thought, but… “No.” Hezran was more worried about what might come here should the worst come to pass and the sound of returning echoes through the cavern hall seemed far too few and far too soon.

No sooner had they been caught up the situation, both Fontaine and Kale returned from the gaping darkness. Hezran was glad the hand he had put to his chest was not to be put to use; at least quite yet. “What happened?”

“To be honest we’re not sure…” Kale seemed a bit distracted, half-hearted if you may.

“Buck up! You’ve always been like this since you came. If you’ve got to look good, remember who it’s for.” And if words weren’t enough, Fontaine always had a heavy hand to offer.

“You’re right…” His back forced straightened Kale took one more deep breath before he was ready to speak again. “Well, I wasn’t there for the most of it, but apparently there wasn’t much to see. Following after, most of the footsteps had all but faded until we reached the trees; they provided good enough cover from the snow. It was starting to get dark, but they were easy enough to follow in besides a few shaking branches that had cut the trails off by piles every now and then. Maybe there was a bit of nostalgia there because the direction veered back towards our town—just a stop to check by they must have thought…”

Kale shook deathly, but it was Fontaine who seemed more grievanced by what came next.

“As you said the village was completely burnt, there shouldn’t have been signs of nothing. But it wasn’t empty. Even from far away it was easy to see the familiar armor’s gleam under threads of moonlight. There were more torches and they seemed to be on watch—it’d be nice to believe for what had happened and survivors. That said we couldn’t see much of else among them or even where the others might have gone.”

“Did they go inside?”

“Don’t know for sure, there was still a bit of field beyond the trees, but there they were either far too clear or laden with far too many tracks to say. There were no signs of struggle though.”

“To be honest up to this point we had the slightest hope they’d somehow managed to trace back around us and we’d all be out by day.” That would have been too easy, too much for even Fontaine’s hope by the forlorn look that held his face.

Kale’s face seemed pale. “If it were that they’d have already come back, but—“

It had already started and Hezran didn’t like the sound of the stoic march echoing closer in the tunnel. “Go gather up the people.”

“Right.” Helen dashed

“I suppose I’ll go with her then.” Fontaine took one glance back to Kale before moving on.

“Then I as well.” Elsenlied left with him.

“I probably won’t be much help, but maybe Age can pull some strings.”

“That’d be great help. Thanks.”

Soon enough only Hezran, Reivyn, and Kale were left inside the throat; the latter’s hand hanging out as if to grasp.

“What good will it do…? We’re already trapped.” From the curve of darkness a single arrow struck towards Kale’s back, diving into the slit of space Hezran opened, pushing Kale forward all the while.

*Reivyn!* Like before floating balls of light appeared in the darkness letting Hezran catch a brief glimpse of their pursuers before the bursting shards of light. The earth quaked and the air rumbled and with a crack—many cracks—the ceiling came down as an avalanche of crushing rocks. Nothing cemented things more than this.

“Move!” The shaking still hadn’t stopped. A moments catch of breath and they would have none left after all.

Hezran felt the back of his heel nipped as he made the final stumble into the mountain’s hiding place within. Fortunately the tall arched walls held stronger than the rest. It was dangerous. It was reckless. But it was equally necessary for his goals, even if it left them all bludgeoned in the head, or trapped them all caught dead. His decision. His blame. A gamble that succeeded, normally that would have been enough to save a week, but now Hezran felt dull to hope for hours.

“…It was a lot easier when I could still believe they had the right in mind.” Kale’s hands had dropped to knees but his eyes were looking up. “I’m sorry I forced your hand. This is not only on you, but us who fell too lax and would have fallen.” He slapped both palms to his cheeks, loud enough to be heard above the remnant rumbles. “I’ve woken up now. I won’t be letting our children go alone this time. No matter what.”

Had his ears betrayed him? Or was it just his mind? Hezran hadn’t expected himself to be so much in shock and half a mind to shrug off Kale’s words. Strange how as one got used to coldness even a little warmth felt enough to burn. “Thank you. If so there’s one more thing I would ask you, knowing this place far better than I. Are there any other paths, even something close or seeming shallow—something that might lead to the outside?”

“If it’s that I’d think we’d best ask the children, reckless little rascals as they are. We haven’t found anything, but then again us elders tend to lose our curiosity with time.”

“Then it’ll be Cull. I wonder where he got to.” It was chaos as expected. No matter how they tried it was just too sudden. In that case it was probably best to look for the calmest part of storm. “Hmm… There they are.”

Strutting straight on through the crowd, it was only a matter of time before they started receiving ugly looks, but none of them had the guts to start anything at this point and time.

“Did you get everyone?” All the children were huddled up in a circle holding their arms together. Some had red eyes and some were sniffling; one of the older boys was still crying his eyes out, but still, for the most part they were calmer than the rest and still able to shine with suns upon their faces a warm melody passing through their lips:

*…the tunnel is deeper and beyond what we see, the nightmares that fester chill at our feet. The ceiling is tall and the darkness it holds, drops countless of droplets soaking our sleep…little ducklings, we walk in rain, patting damp feathers in seeking of warmth…there is no fire or light for our way, but for the feeling of fingers crossing their ways…a fragile bundle, only together can we keep the stealers of dreams at bay…*

Cull cautioned with his eyes to wait. Going around the circle, for each ones tear’s Cull was there to wipe them and pat them on the heads so that amidst the storm he kept them gently rocking back and forth. It was a bit of an unexpected side; something that seemed more taught then learned—a bit clumsy like a puddle’s wavered reflection—but powerful none the less.

Only once their shivering quieted did Cull let go his grasp. “So what it? Where are we going?”

“That was what we hoped to ask. I was wondering if the children had seen anything interesting as they played. I’ve heard they’ve dug in corners no one knows.”

“I’ll ask them.” A calm, quiet voice the children’s eyes sparkled. A treasure hunt. Cull new exactly the questions to ask and before long they were whispering among themselves with glee, trading words and scratching crude drawings into paper. “They say there was something…but it’s strange. If there were an exit there it wouldn’t lead outside, but further in—or should I say across. We’d be moving through the range.”

“Still, where abouts? It might be our only hope.” Stranger existences oft followed strange existences. The fact that you couldn’t see them was just proof that you didn’t know enough; knew less too strongly. In the first place this entire cavern was so wholly unnatural in itself that a little more would hardly be surprising.

Cull flipped through the scribbles, trying to find one that made sense or could be made sense of. Around the fourth set of pages he flipped through his eyes lit up. “Here!” It seemed they had a young artist among them yet.

*Let’s see…* Scanning the document as quickly as his eyes would reasonably allow Hezran gathered the spot. From the third opening on the left… *Got it!* “Can you tell Helen and the others to funnel everyone towards this point?”

“Sure, but to be honest I wasn’t able to get exactly where they meant in such short time.”

“If you’re not the piper than you can follow the children. They’ll know where he blows, though we’d better hope there be no rats.” There was no time to explain. They needed action.

*Come on, Reivyn!* From the looks of it the path the children spoke of was more of a blocked off chamber plugged by boulders more than a few flights up. Shovels and picks would take too long and a bomb could leave them worse, however, if she could make a gap just large enough to sink his fangs he would be able to take care of the rest. He only hoped the entrance wasn’t shallow.

Heading in through the gap they found a length of crude stone stairs, chipped and weathered as if some tremendous force had blown through, but enough grip to propel them carefully. Every raise in story was accompanied with twists and turns, blocked off paths and mazes. Had they made a wrong turn? Had they read it wrong? Every passing hole of light and sound grew more spectered as they rose. *Fall… Fall… Falling down…*

Just when the air began to scream they reached the spot. Claws to crush, fire to burst, water to loosen. And he was left to clear the rubble. It was smooth, too precise; not fast enough. Hezran needed a larger net.

*Imagine an extension.* Iris’s words rang in his head.

*You’re about the only one who would use such a brutal method.*

*Effective is the word. People have an understanding of projectiles trained since ancient times. When they see a rock they see it being thrown. When they see a blade they see it cutting. The two ranges are inherently displaced in the human mind and that surprise can be the key to victory.*

*You say it like it’s easy.*

*Be flexible. You must’ve played with water as a kid; shot up streams between your fingers; hopped it around as if it were extension of your hand. It’s like that but bigger, more stable; a fake turned real. Like…*

A blade of pitch-black nothingness; straight, unswerving, consuming; farther, farther, father. Straight through to the other side.

The dagger shimmered darkly in his hands. Its point gleamed, spreading insubstantial ooze, squirming at first, before bursting out like that infinite lance of light. A black line that sucked in everything scattered while leaving certainties intact. And finally they could see the other side of the tunnel. Whether it was light or a further glimpse of hell he couldn’t tell from here.

Hezran’s head pounded with an ache as the shimmering darkness vanished. Dropping to his knees he felt the fur crawling up his skin. It felt cold…then he felt warm. *Thank you.*

Reivyn had pulled him to the wall warming him ever so carefully with her fire. He felt like he could go on a little more yet. And a good thing too, with the frantic stomping just now closing in.

“Are you alright!?”

Very few could have asked that question so sincerely. His pulsing mind didn’t have the wits about to know. Just… “There…to the other side… There’s no time to waste.” He would rest here a few seconds and follow after, once sure they were safe.

Fading out…and in. At least he wasn’t broken, though the burning tendrils screamed.

*There…* They all had passed. Now all he needed was close the door. *Ah, there’s the lever… You’ll get it for me?* Then he could just drag himself beyond and then collapse…

“It’s terrible!” A blunter tool pierced his headache.

“How?” Things were bad, he knew it, but they had chanced their way out. What more to ask?

“That’s not it—I’ve checked the people coming by; there’s still one missing.”

Suddenly he was impaled by a flash of life. It was Helen that he saw. “I thought everyone was gathered up!”

“They were. She still can’t walk very well herself so we had someone lend her a shoulder. She should have been climbing the stairs along with them. It wouldn’t have been surprising if she fell during that final rush.”

“Dammit…” The stone wall was already clamping down. There was a bit of time, Hezran doubted they would find it so easily. But with each precious second, glimpses of their safety grew slimmer yet. All the thought of how easily things could go wrong…they accompanied him as he stumbled back beneath the gate. “Keep it shut. Two raps if we make it back.” Turning, his head still woozy, Hezran heard the slab come to a grating halt. “Make it three…”

*You’re not leaving all alone without me. Not this time.*

*If that’s how it’s going to be, I’ve got a better idea…*

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Animosity

…Each step felt as if her leg were being wrenched like a towel between two hands steamed by boiling, seeping water. Holding herself up by the wall it was all she could do to concentrate on the next step, careful not to slip. Her ankle twisted at odd angels making wonder of the bone, but such fractured pain was minor in comparison.

This was her chance. If she could just meet with the others she’d have her way out—back to her grandfather and her liege.

She felt herself black out for a moment and the next thing she realized she woke up bruised as a lemon bounced down from up high. There was a blast and smoke…it was hard for her to breathe.

Shadows started pouring through, flowing like a dam burst forth. They were quick, enveloping, everywhere…and soon they came to prey on her.

*Why are you pointing that thing at me…? Can’t you see my clothes? My badge…* Maybe they hadn’t realized, after all she’d been so tattered. Ah, there it was, slipped off on the ground. She just had to show them.

One of the silhouettes out back seemed to raise its hand and an overwhelming sense of relief flowed through her mind…or maybe it was just the pain had breached her final barriers. Now she might be able to listen.

“A precious, little sky-princess fallen to the ground. Looks like you’ve been saved from all that trouble. Good. Very good.”

What were they doing? The blades didn’t pierce her flesh but she felt as losing something more. It didn’t matter men or women. People…just beasts. Some took part; the others laughed.

“The people upside are tired of chasing moles; they said it’s fine as long as no one knows. No truer words.” What were they saying!? “…and there is the matter of morale that needs to be maintained. There’s a difference between living innocent and living knowing of one’s evil. Everyone deserves a pill to keep down their insanity. But such value. Today…today we are very lucky indeed. Chains and ropes oh what to do—and can’t be recognizable to after.”

*No…! Don’t come closer!* But they wouldn’t stop—those hands clawing, groping, baring their ugly appendages forward; full enraptured…and then blood poured.

She was wet, so wet. Something seemed to be missing. Lifeful tombstones left headless, spraying; a line in stone carved by jet. Next thing she knew she was floating, rising faster than the zombies had a chance collapse.

“That explains it. If you’re from Freyr no wonder you would leave. But you should be more careful. Even tools have their will; supressed and twisted though it may be—scarier for it.”

*Don’t you hate me too?*

“She was worried. She’d be sad to see you gone.”

For the first time she caught a glimpse of the man’s face. It felt familiar; a bit older and more weathered. She thought she recognized him coming around sometimes, or vaguely being there by her side. ”Ah…you loved her.”

He smiled. “It was a long time ago. In different a different place, under different circumstances. But well, I can’t let you head on back so soon. Not know that you know my secret.”

That robe was familiar also, dirtied and beaten, though she’d only caught a glimpse.

“Don’t worry. There will be a time soon where you’ll get to meet her. One way or another I’ll make sure of it…though that won’t bring the old man back.”

What did he mean? What happened to grandpa…! The ground began to shake.

“Well crap! Who knew they had something like that, not that they’d be able to control it, but it’s got a fantastic sense for blood. Sorry girl but I’m going need to be a little rough.”

*Wha—s*he felt herself tossed; flightless, wingless, falling; before striking a solid rock against her chest.

“Hit the wall three times. They’ll take care of you.”

For some reason it’s sounded like his voice was sinking. Clambering against the surface she hoped her knocks had sounded right. At least she thought she did as her last remaining consciousness felt movement beneath her sliding palms…

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Spears and Icicles

Fallen again. He’d fallen so many times he’d lost count how many.

Hezran had almost reached the gate before Reivyn had come to join him to. Suddenly the mountain had quaked all the louder. It was something different from the mines they’d set, something moving, searching; screaming rage and anger.

Before they had known it the rock beneath them had begun to fall apart like flakes, all he could do to send his victim on her way. And then they fell again.

Only staring down into that blackest hole did they truly realize how high they were, so much they couldn’t see the ground. So much so that the hole seemed to pass on through the ground.

As they whistled by Hezran caught glimpse of something dark-brown, dirty-grey, squirming through the rock; shaking it. He did his best to turn to his side and nip its fur, taking a sized chunk down with him. As expected only small blood dripped before the rest was bound and the flesh within his claw turned into dust.

*This is going to be a problem.* It was heading in the same direction the others fled. Whether they made it to an open space or found themselves trapped in dusty catacombs it wouldn’t matter, just a glimpse of the size was enough to make him shudder.

How could they stop it? First they had to stop their fall. Was there anything they could do, no matter how far they sunk the pit never seemed to end. And for some reason the darkness below was slowly growing brighter. As if hells and heavens stood reverse they found themselves enveloped.

It felt as if they had landed in something soft and elastic, caressing inertia as to nothing. Hezran’s mind must have been tricking him. Beneath his back grew stiff as his eyes imagined impalement on the hard spikes of pulsing crystal laid below. Reivyn was the same, though seemed more dazed…for other reasons.

As if in tune with the rooms rainbow glow her bracelet sparked in equal—and so did her eyes and the piece of translucent wood bound clumsily to her hair.

The earth’s trembling had stopped…at least for the moment it seemed everything had stopped.

…And then the glow grew to its peak; a crystal cracked then shattered, its green, shimmering seed floating whimsically in the air before them—perhaps waiting for a touch—for on Reivyn’s fingers meeting time that had seemed set unfroze. Accompanied by new waking quakes there was a tremendous gust of wind, impossible of place and so strong to be as the rapid whirling of a great tornado fossilized in the very midst of a most ferocious riot.

In an instant they were hurtled back into the stone-full sky, their passage carved rounder with each turn. Falling spears will pulverized within the wind’s reach, as the eye pushed through further stony tunnels chasing the crushing waggle of the beast—faster. Faster!

Like a spinning bullet shot from the barrel of giant zephyr rule they sheared through its body and straight above the earth into the sunshine… S*unshine?* The light was bright but the ceiling not only blue or white, but as many shimmering colours as they’d found below—crystal.

But this wasn’t the time to be worrying about such things, the shaking still continued—in fact the thrashing throes of death grew only louder. *I guess we missed it.*

*Not quite.* Reivyn directed him towards her hand. Between two fingers were caressed a stone of green and brown, leaving more questions than were answered. *This one’s a twin.*

Looking to the rising hill that bore up from the ground, the wound they had left seemed slow to heal, even for its size, and its once proud deep ochre fur seemed greyed from age. With an ear-splitting screech it rolled; intent on flattening even in its pain.

Hezran grabbed Reivyn to pull them back as she caressed the fragile final winds to give them wings a length—they cleared the space—but it was not enough. More than towering digits or the waves of dust and debris shocks, it was the piercing, rocky splinters erupting from the ground that cut their path.

Each time the spikes came up and each time Hezran swallowed them, feeling his mind and body slowly breaking. There was no space to move, no time to breath; the palms were coming down too fast. *Is there anything we can…to slow it down.*

It seemed hopeless. For all that girth, for all that weight and pain, the speed far less than faltered.

Was it just his imagination that he felt a cool breeze?

*No.* A flow of water and wind to freeze. Shackles of ice had begun to form around the pulsing paw. Each time it made contact with the earth it stuck a little stronger; its momentum faltered and then a bridge of ice cemented to keep it locked. *Now’s your chance!*

Already cracks had begun to form, the seams looked moments from undone. It was a short distance; far too long to run. Maybe he was in the air once more—he didn’t know. His mind was focused on that single point and he would make the arrow pierce, reckless and true.

It was muddy, murky, and bloody as he sheared once more; twisted through its body like a microbe parasite. The small brown light, it caught his eye, and in an instant he had torn it free, the rest of muscly resistance vanishing as he fled. By the time he reached the other side he was a good as glistened dough by powdered sugar, as if he didn’t stink before.

But really the view was beautiful, laying upside on the ground. The ceiling tall… The forest wide… The songs of birds…and other noises coming close. Ah…we need to bury the hole.

*Just sleep.*

It was strange his body felt more just like lead. He couldn’t even feel his muscles, but somehow the quiet rumblings of the ground massaged him to the depths of rest.

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Fever

*Why bother?*

Was it the adrenaline, or simply a painful lack of mind? Either way she had knocked the dividing door. There was no turning back.

They were so kind to her. They’d bandaged her, treated her and wiped her down; even laying her in the soft down they had so little of and against a warm hearth of infrequent logging. Someone like her.

How long had she been unconscious? There was no measure for time of days so deep below. Even if there was she was not confident she would be able to tell more than day or night, all her tools lost to storm.

One thing was clear in that the quaking had stopped. The ground was peaceful. Given that they even shared a room at all spoke volumes. That monstrosity.

Leave them alone long enough and they’d erode on their own. Even for the creators binding them up in solid chain from birth, shooting them with sleeping needles was about the best to hope.

It was amazing. It was dangerous.

He was there, sleeping silent, restful, and naive; likely the one behind her peoples troubles. It would be easy enough to slit a dagger to his throat.

He had saved her, saved them; an eternal thorn. Who was she kidding? How they would laugh at her. But that was how she’d found her place for one. *Maybe…*

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The Dagger’s Point

“I’d appreciate it if you put that down.” Hezran had been resting peacefully, but if someone skimmed intent so clumsily for long, even sloths would start to itch.

Maybe that was the wrong approach. The dagger jumped from Elis’ hand like a startled rabbit escaping its den. “Wait…”

He was the one that wanted her to wait, but by the time he could raise his arms the blade had already skinned his nose, or at least it felt so close. What really worried him was the screech in following. More than anything it’d be a problem if someone stepped in now.

“Brother!” Strange, Hezran didn’t remember having siblings so close, let alone same of gender. “What are you doing?!”

There was the sound of a bucket dropping with a thump. From beneath the clawing overlook of Elis’ hands Hezran saw Cull grab her in a hold. “Wait—“

Words fallen on deaf ears, the situation was looking more dangerous each second Elis’s neck was drawn closer to an arch.

“I said stop!” If words wouldn’t work…

Cull’s vision shone. In an instant Hezran had took to wobbly feet and laid him with a wallop strong enough to bring them both to ground.

“Why…?”

“Because.”

“But she tried to kill you.”

“And she couldn’t even if she wanted!” It was Hezran could do to catch his breath and leave a few sour eyes in turn. “Even then you’d have it wrong.”

“What does that mean?” What else could there be…

“You wouldn’t take pity on me if you knew the truth!” Her vein had been pressed, not once but twice. Elis couldn’t bear but burst. “This bastard and me we’re both the same. We’re the ones responsible. I’m only part of the group that came down to clean up the scraps.” Elis made no effort to stop Cull, eyes lit up in rage. If Cull could kill her to it’d only be so easy.

“If that’s what you want!”

“It’s exactly what she wants.” The cold snake didn’t just stop at ears. “Don’t you see you’re being a fool? What can one little lady do against the world, though there are us that would try to prove it wrong? Take a look to her stance. She’s hardly a fighter; if I had to guess she’s barely wet behind the ears. That isn’t a rabid demon that you’d point your fist, rather a suicide seeker too cowardly to put the noose her own.

“In the first place it wasn’t me at threat of knife, it was her threatening her own. The way she trembled made me afraid her hand might slip.”

“If you knew…” *Why’d you stop me?* It was what she’d wanted. The world was cold and now she was lonely.

“Sure he’s gone; stone cold. I saw his grave myself. But surely there are more shoulders to bear your tears than just on his.”

“If only you knew… No, I suppose you would.” She couldn’t wipe them on anyone near; her salt soaked sleeve would have to do. “I suppose this is your obligation in a sense.”

“That too.”

“Even from us.”

“No matter from who…” He wondered if he could say it honestly. Though he wished, he was a little squeamish at the heart. “We’re all cowards. It’s part of the reason we try to live.” *I don’t want to die. I don’t want to lose anything.*

“Then even more. You shouldn’t have had any reason to go farther. You could have taken her, weakened as she was. Knowing who you were, I’m sure she wouldn’t have struggled much, unless—you didn’t show your face did you. In the first place how are you here? No, I see. You’re the one with the crystal ball.”

“You’re more cunning than you first let on.”

“Don’t worry, the tears were real. So what exactly are you planning? I suppose the destruction of a nation must look rather good.”

“Even that would be a little too much for me, though maybe just in soul.” At least that got her to laugh a little. “…There are things you hate in this world that you want to protect, things you hate in this world that you grow to love.”

“And just what does that mean.”

“The things I hate the most in this world are also the things I love the most. Are you sure you haven’t felt the same?”

“Well, to some extent.”

“There’s no need to hide so much. Even I can think of things I’d rather be rid of. To put it simply I’m conflicted. But I still intend to move forward.” A splotch upon a certain chair perhaps, but that was far away. “In any case…” Hezran turned Cull around so he could see him. ”This doesn’t get out of this room, understand.”

“No… Yes… I suppose. This doesn’t mean she’ll be treated any nicer though. They’ve kept away cause she’s sick for now, but even without this everyone’s wary of strangers. That includes you…to some extent even me. Even the recent happenings.”

“Then that’s easy enough isn’t it. I was planning to leave somewhere anyway.”

“Huh? What! You can’t be serious. Then I’ll come—“

“No you’ll stay. I need someone I can trust to look after our jolly princess here. If you feel bad for anything then you can help sneak me out.”

“Where are you going?”

“Let’s see. Where do you think you’d be able to get the best view of the sky in a city on this continent?”

“The capital,” Elis interrupted. “If you’re looking for a place of entrance it would have to be their headquarters, that white-washed piece of crap, the Ancestral Tower. I think you’d be crazy to try to get inside.”

“You would hardly be the first.” It matched the message and crazier things would be left if they dared wait.

*We’re going right?* Reivyn got up from the sheets beside him. In truth she’d been long awake.

*That was rather mean.*

*Even an anti-hero needs their rest.*

All that was left was a method of travel. It would take time and they were known. Security would probably be worse up close as well…

“If it’s that, I might be able to help, at least as far as the gates.” Cull had all but given up and thrown his hands behind his head. “In fact your timing couldn’t be better.”

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Different Anglers

A crowded sea of clamoring people. An infinite line to cast for fish. It was the most enjoyable time for merchants such as themselves, no shortage of the rich looking to dump their earnings; no shortage of the downcast looking to salve their deepening wounds.

*That one’s…a bit too young, seems to like flaunting but his pockets aren’t deep and her… I know her type, she has the cash but all she’ll do is talk your ear off and leave without a single coin spent. Isn’t there someone good, instant feed and a big catch at that…?*

The two seemed a bit shady, but from all the candy and string held in the shorter’s hand they couldn’t be anything more than a doting father and a spoiled child…and a buck to be made between. “It’s exciting, the festival, isn’t it?”

“Hard to believe a year has already turned around. Though I hear things go a bit differently here than in the country?”

“From out of the city then? Well, no complaints as long as your good for coin.”

The man in the cloak cast another ring of silver from his palm.

“Much obliged. Well, let’s see…” The merchant stroked his beard thinking where to start. “Originally the celebration was made as a sort of a wind up, wind down—a mental saving for the days of darkness in-between. You see there’s no place where the black moon comes closer; or place where it seems bigger, darker.”

Even now just a bare half of the sun could be seen glimmering beyond the surface above.

“It’s amazing that everyone can keep so calm.”

“We’re told it’s a trial of sorts. That making it through the night unscathed is proof the ardent see your purity and your faith. Though, I’m really just in it for the sales.” Those eyes gleaming green seemed anything but pure, however, one word in particular caught the mind.

“Unscathed?”

“Oops, did I let that slip. I’ll consider if…”

“You sure are greedy.”

“I’ll take that as a complement.” Another jingle in their purse, they were really skinning the sheep today. ”You see…”

The merchant cut their voice. The clank of steel could be heard just now and rounding the corner an ordered line of armored spears crossed behind the stall—a bit heavy for such times of glee. Only once the last had passed did the merchant dare to voice again, steady but a few decibels lower for the sound.

“There’s always a few residents that go missing in the night; you might not notice with how plenty enough there are to fill their empty places. They’re said to have moved away—one of my best friend’s one of them—but no parcels I ever sent reached their owner.”

“Are you sure about telling all this?”

“It’s a loose held secret. Let the wrong person find out you know and it’s confinement for you. Strange how the prisoners often go forgotten.”

“That’s quite the gamble you’re taking.”

“What could you possibly mean?”

“Well since you’ve saddled me with such dark knowledge I’m sure you wouldn’t mind telling us just one more thing.”

“If it’s about my account books I refuse.”

“I can’t say I’m not interested, but really it’s nothing of the sort. We’re just interested to know the best time to visit the tower. I hear it’s really quite the sight.”

“Oi, oi, you’re not thinking anything dangerous are you.”

“Not for others at least. Just thought to visit an old friend and…surprise them.” So many old friends indeed.

“A visit, huh. I suppose you might offer a bit of coin to the night’s watch. Otherwise there’s the Moonlight Mass. Just before the eclipse fully comes, at the holiest time where a bare strand of silver peaks between the gaps, trickling to the Ardent stone, filling it, glowing it, the sacred ritual is held. It’s the only time of year us normal citizens are let into the protectors’ entrance hall, to kneel and to pray. They say the filtered light can cure any disease and more of dreams—personally I believe that’s a bunch of hogwash. No end to the sickly and the ordinary that trade a life of livelihood just to visit. The struggles something immense and the courtyards already packed with waiting. I’d give up my chances if I were you.”

“No much to do I suppose… Here.”

“This much!?” Strange looks abound. They couldn’t help it. It was such a full bag, heavy too; probably the only one on carry.

“Take it. It’ll all be pointless where we’re going.” As the man turned the girl followed, wisps of cotton candy strangling to her sharpened teeth with the toon mask she wore seeming all the more real for the spouting at its fore.

The merchant couldn’t help but felt guilt they might have set some terrible idea into motion…if only for a second.

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White Tower/Ardent Pillar

*White-washed indeed… So how is it?*

It wasn’t easy, pushing their way into the crowd; a bit forceful. A battlefield with blades and silvered points all around them, bodies shoved and hands gleaned, just short of rioting. Lined around by loosely watching guards, it gave the feeling of subdued carnage, one chained by lazy yawns, scratching necks and bare raw smiles.

Moving on inside the mood tensed only slightly, though the occasional overzealous worship was met by the back end of a mallet beyond the sacred barrier.

*It’s not nothing; but it’s just weak stray traces. Not to say of granting fortune or good looks, it just doesn’t have that type of nature, I suppose it might be able to help with something like indigestion.*

Even so the people crowded fervently, wantonly, and most always the same kind—no silken robes or jewelry except the few.

*Humans, we…* All it took was a glimpse, one success for every million failures; most definitely unrelated—enough to make them wild. He couldn’t blame them. He was the same. Even now he was looking for that slight gap, that little break in the wall where he could see a little light shining through even if in the end it all turned out to be a fading lamp.

*They’re changing shifts!*

*Good.* He was glad he’d asked Reivyn to keep on lookout. There was far too much noise for him.

Both of them moved towards the side of the room. Along with her message, Elsenlied had left them a map showing the quickest way to reach the peak along with the places most likely to keep hidden. It also helped given the date they had planned. Most of the rabble had been cleared out-front and only in the deepest recesses of the towers could they expect much life. All part of keeping arrangements secret. The hard part remained clearing the entrance, but there was hope for that too…

The crowd roared wildly. The crystal it was shining, not just frailly as before, but like a second silver sun. More than peasants’ eyes were caught by web. And with it they never heard so much as the click of slipping door.

*You were able to convince even that one as well?* Hezran had heard a bit about it from Reivyn afterwards, that crystal cave they’d fallen to—the Ardent equivalent of a burial ground, or a cemetery to be so gross. Of course, unlike humans it didn’t go all at once, they started out as seeds, as of a plant; a very special crystal tree. That way if they disagreed with the soil or renewed some other calling they could up and burst their glass and blow to new horizons. To have grown so large…this place must have been quite comfortable for it.

*Not so much. That seed’s already planted well. It’s lost most consciousness except idea. With its wish to spread its blessings all I had to do was push a little.* As expected it was dark. Upending her palm a little Reivyn brought a small glowing orb to fore and floated it just a bit ahead, a torch without the stick. At the very least the stairs were pristine white…just them and their echoes.

Slowly the channel narrowed to a tip, only a single slanted window at the top to view their grip. The handle didn’t turn full way. Turning his ear to the plate Hezran didn’t her any footsteps or voices—there seemed to be a mild humming in the background, but it was from fairly far away. It was a bit time consuming but the quietest thing would have been to forge a key; Reivyn could forge a little stone for that—the Ardent knew how much else she had.

But before that could be done, new sound came up behind. Had they been figured out from the prints theyèd left behind? Too soon! But they couldn’t say for sure. Still, they could spare some time no longer.

A silent incision slid through the gap like butter. It would be obvious if the door was moved, but at least it would give the appearance of being still intact, at worst something more easily overlooked.

Without stopping, they crawled along the final round of stairs as swift as their footsteps could be silent beneath the slight whispers of an unnatural wind flowing through their corridor that soon carried others sounds to their ears:

“I see he still fails to have the presence to bother coming down himself.”

“I apologize deeply on the lord’s behalf. There are any matters to attend to in Freyr. He simply could not find the time.”

“A matter of priority I assume. If only you were actually sincere—“

There was the sound of steel clashing wood and for a brief moment silence passed…only until another new voice passed through the air. Strangely Hezran couldn’t put a tone to it, just the words.

“Come now dear. You shouldn’t force your father speak up. He’s got an image to keep.”

“An image is all the Silver Knight has left to keep.” Certainly not me, as if to say.

In fact her words were so dire as to elicit a soothed response from their visitor, if only ever slight. “Indeed a father’s job is always harder than one might think; hard enough that sometimes keeps us away and makes us seem as demons. But I do hope you understand that any further insults will not be tolerated?”

“Yes, terribly. Then about the next shipment—“

Once again the room went eerily silent, enough to pause Hezran and Reivyn at the gate, caught with doors on either side. All they needed was to turn right, down the ascending hallway passed the breach of opened glass where white merged with black. That should have been all there was to it, but as strange as their ears fell silent so did their arms and legs, red lines caused by near invisible string keeping them stay.

The devil’s left burst open for a sinking moment leaving their crouching forms exposed before the scarce sat table…but only briefly before an untuned gust of wind pried them forcefully off their feet and ripped them from their loosened bounds to send them funneling down its maw at right.

For a brief moment their faces must have been exposed. Hezran wondered just how much the others saw. But no matter, their meticulously uncontrolled ascent showed no signs relent.

It was hard enough to see between flying objects and passing flashing lights. No matter how far he strained his eyes, all there was was an abundance of infinite metal frames leading into an unending pit of darkness; however, his nose… His nose sensed a more pungent smell than iron.

They must have been going supremely fast. All it took was an instant to make the crash, embraced by putrid smells and plastic shells with embedded shards of iron. Painful, even as he was he still felt pain, his back full of lacerations; infected bloody scratches. The flow only grew worse as they pulled away.

*That wind, it wasn’t yours?*

*No, even with similar intent it wouldn’t listen. Something else dominated for control…* It was quite a blow for her. As his ears kept ringing uncontrollably Hezran couldn’t help but wonder what was the cause. Ill intent or perhaps—

Above them pistons compressed from steam bidding the crank of swiftning descent. It took only a moment to realize they were in a garbage pit, and seconds less to see that they were soon to be compressed. Even as he pushed with all his might to propel them free just beyond the stamps Hezran couldn’t come unscathed, as a lost scrap of cloth and a spare tip of heel were crushed beneath the hammers weight. It was enough to make him scream despite himself.

Maybe his voice had even been loud enough to pierce the working sounds, because above their softening rumble there was the sound of footsteps coming down.

The pain stopped swiftly, swifter than they would have in the past—the farther he fell causing faster falling. There was no place to hide, they could have tried to run away but strangely the gates that led them in were shut. Even as it was Reivyn was already panicking from her distraction’s healing casualty, but well… *It should be alright.*

This was the garbage dump, at the very bottom of the city—the recesses were no noble soul would dare to come. The only types you would find here were the dead and the downtrodden; the ones who truly kept the city stay afloat.

“Is anyone there!?” The lamplight shone near above, near blinding them of the wide girth of the man that stood behind. “Two of you, huh. How’d you get don there? It’s dangerous you know.”

“Terribly sorry! We’d lost our way.”

“And nearly lost your lives as well… You must be new. Got a pretty good memory for them faces, haven’t seen your likes before—not that you’re showing much. Though now I think of it the taller one might ring a bell.”

“From the army sir. Couldn’t pass muster nor will enough.”

“Sir! Now that’s a laugh. Pretty surprising considering all the glory hogs around.”

“I’m from the ground originally.”

“That explains a measure. Either that or you’d have to be another weirdo…just don’ tell anyone I spoke that, the words got a way to go around.” His hand stank of sewage, but it was the only one to grasp. “The name’s Balbus! Had a last name, but it’s not worth much nowadays. In case no one was courteous enough to give you the run before—I welcome you to the garbage dump!”

--

Contract

The woman could only look on in exasperation. “So what is it this time? Caught your arm in a generator or something? I may be a doctor, but if I was of professional opinion I’d probably just lob it off.”

“Sorry!” No matter what words came out of his mouth, with only one hand to put up in apology they had no force of meaning. “I didn’t think they’d be making tests when they just did. But that’s why I came to you.”

“They must have been getting bored just sitting quietly in their chairs all day, though I’m sure they never expected to catch a mouse as such.” She’d start with the cream. Where the natural remedies would work it was best to use them. The human life-force was far from infinite. “Seriously, going out of your way to do something stupid like this… I’m wondering if you’d better learn without one.”

“Please don’t make such a scary face. It seems more serious when you’re holding a scalpel at hand.” True the glint gave a cool feel, but even mere presence couldn’t help but bring to thought images of the unhindered edge’s causing leaking as it flowed through tender flesh. It didn’t help that all she did was grunt much either. “Um… I’d appreciate if you’d hurry it up. There’s somewhere I need to—“

Was it just his imagination that her hand slipped, that and the few droplets that slid along her fingers and splashed upon her face? “You need to be careful. Take things too fast and you’ll just drain your life.”

“So you say, but I feel like I’ve pretty much used up my life just making it this far.”

“Not only yours,” though who knew how fast they’d waste away otherwise. “…Never mind, I suppose. I won’t make it painless.”

“That’s fine. It just needs to work and as long as you’ll help me with the *clothes*.”

“As long as you get me the *key*.”

“The beauty and the beast, huh. That’s something I’d sure like to see.” Hal put his working hand forward; joined just a second long enough for something to pass between. “Then we have a deal.”

She snorted. “Whatever the case I’m sure you’ll just bring more of the wild and broken sort my way.”

The *man* lifted his finger to his chin. With what he had in mind her worries were neither true nor something false; just as the cheap wool he balled around his real flesh.

“Who knows, you might be surprised.”

--

Dregs

It was as miserable as ever. Hezran remembered coming down to settle petty altercations the others couldn’t be bothered to deal. The sight of it now made him think just how small of a thing those confrontations were.

It stunk of piss and broken needles; too much for any child to keep sane on landing. There was a saying that people didn’t live past twelve.

“You must have gotten hurt pretty badly while you were down there, plenty of blood to show. Good for you I know a doctor.”

“Hah…” Truth was things were already healed, but Balbus took it another way.

“Not that kind, believe me. She’s the best in town; probably better than the ones they have upstairs.” Balbus paused a moment. “Just…don’t make any comments about the bloody pipe.”

*Pipe, huh…* Puzzled memories clicked at once in Hezran’s head. The area they came to reach did seem a bit cleaner than the rest; some straighter standing bodies even stooped to picking trash. Ignoring the rust-brown patches splashed around—the scenery seemed almost peaceful. For the sordid atmosphere to change so much from just her presence… *This person must be one strange duck indeed.*

If there was one thing that didn’t change as they’d come deeper, it was the wear of time. Balbus stopped in front of what once must have been a taller building, now crumbled at the edges and with threadbare supports—certainly not the kind of place you’d expect to find an angel in white and hopefully not the devil for that matter—if it weren’t for the grizzled H sparking half-mast above.

Balbus bent his knees to struggle with the door, a dented thing so rusted at the edges that it hardly moved inch. Even putting his foot up against the surrounding wall for push, the opening seemed as stubborn as mule until the concrete gave way and a severed handle was sent shearing straight back against their stiffening hairs leaving the phantom taste of blood on Hezran’s and Reivyn’s tongues; the fleshy ball that sent the chilling gift rolling back to hit the wall where the sheet of metal now lay embedded with a thump loud enough to disturb a sleeping dragon—one that also roared with steel in her hand.

“Dammit, you fat pig! I told you to knock.” There wasn’t even time to blink. One second he was righting himself up and the next…Balbus was pinned to the ground, foot on arm and knee in belly, a raging arm flailing dangerously near above.

“S-since you know, w-why don’t you stop pointing such a dangerous thing?!”

“What foolishness you say; who you are has nothing to do with it. Though we might welcome nice environmentally-friendly-Balbus with open arms, I’ll gladly bash property-destruction-Balbus’ face straight in until it’s bloody well unrecognizable—mayhaps that change your ways. Now, I wonder where the good one went.” Were these two really acquaintances…?

“V-violence! No violence!” The way he winced, it clearly wasn’t his first time facing off against the snake.

“You know…I just don’t think that’s possible. I’m a doctor after all and that constant smiling of yours…I think it needs repairing.”

“That’s your real reason isn’t it!!?” But by then it was already well too late; the blunt, brown edge of the silver cylinder was already half-way through descent. Others hardly looked, stiff as lightning rods for fear of being struck; Balbus quick resigned to his despair—snivelling, shrivelling—screaming like a child…all, except for that widely broken smile.

“…What are you doing?” It was the last straw; the frozen statues could be seen scrambling towards their dunes. The doctor clearly wasn’t happy to have her scalpel stopped mid-operatum. She didn’t need to look. Her tone alone was froze the very blood.

“No reason, it’s just you see…he brought me somewhere so interesting, so I figured I might as well reward him.”

“What are you, a cop!?” Swing as she might, the rod was stuck; crunching beneath heavy iron nails.

“With a face like this?” And she didn’t seem all that surprised when caught a glimpse—the creeping fur and scarring hand. “I’m just another sorrowed soul in search of guidance.”

“Definitely, with a face like that you look more an angry demon than anything else. I’m amazed you keep so stoic, and that they’ve left you run so free.”

“Whether they’re a girl covered in a stained, white dress or a rabid runt set free from the gallows—every child needs to grow up, even if only on the outside.”

“…Consider me interested.” Enough to loosen the silver sliver’s clutch around his neck. “Hal told me to expect sometime soon—though I would never have expected you to know the girl, least of all her past.”

“He didn’t tell you? We all knew each other well, though you’re right that Iris would never speak of her foundations to a soul: I learned of those some other time. But given the stories, you seemed like a useful person to have around.”

“Only for the moments where our interests coincide. Well, come inside. We’ll see what we can do for your…sickness.”

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Backstage

It was a secret chamber somewhere close to power—a place only known to him and tools—where it was brought to lie upon the table.

A smack resounded in the cramped dark space where the only other sounds were the constant bubbling of verdant capsules as more poisonous filled the suspensions from the scattered tubes that ran along the floor.

“All you needed to do was bring the body back unharmed—I even gave you the benefit of his weakened state. It makes me wonder why I even went to the trouble of setting things up that way. What is the point of your existence if you cannot even complete such a simple task?”

She couldn’t say anything back. She didn’t have a voice with which to say anything back.

“And don’t you forget what it is that gave birth to you.” Even if she were to be thrown down the chute along with the so many other failed fetal corpses, so it was the creator’s right.

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Ultimatum

“I see we’ve got another idiot… You might even be the bigger one.” That was the first thing said after examining Hezran underneath his coat. “How long has it been?”

“You lose track of time out in the wilderness. I wouldn’t say more than two years.”

“Certainly, that’s not bad. Considering you were in the wild I would have almost expected worse.”

That would be a sigh of relief.

“The infection is nearing its final stages; I’m almost surprised you can stand at all. Most subjects at this stage either go wild from the pain, or break. Even without your help’s speeding it along, there’s not much time to live.”

Hezran sigh turned into a sinking heart. He’d have been lying if he said he hadn’t had any hope at all that some foreign tool from the sky might be able to provide some sort of cure. Every day his arm throbbed and ached as he danced precariously on knife’s edge, between humanity and its bestial form. Who would be left to carry out his will and be with her in a world so loving and so hostile? Just another reason he’d have to live to keep those worries buried in his heart. Still… “That’s fine, but—”

“That’s fine!? I take it all back; you are definitely the biggest idiot.”

“You’re right, but don’t call it an infection.”

“I’ll call it whatever I want—Ardent know I’ve seen enough of it.”

“Even if you think it, to me this is my life!” *Never speak Ill of what she’s given me.*

“Fine…have it your way. But I suggest you start writing you’re last will unless you want to leave your bucket list of problems behind with her.”

That was the last thing Hezran wanted. It was all the more important that he destroy it—this world that would corrupt her—before he took his final breath.

But it was strange. For someone who’s words were so angry how could she smile still?

“I’m amazed you managed to bring her this far. You know how many would die to get their hands on a sample like her?”

“Literally…” Hezran hadn’t even searched, yet he had had to die to meet. “If it hurts you to say it so much than you shouldn’t say it.”

“If only… But never mind, it is definitely too much to hope. As your doctor this is my only prognosis—to live as long and as strong as you can until your final days. And…“ Reise placed her palm against her chin to cut short her voice, leaving a furrowed brow if only for a moment. Then without a thought she got up

“Where are you going?”

“You’re free to use this place as much as needed. In regards to your friend and his measured crime; I’m sure Balbus can fill you in.”

“You’re not planning on coming back.”

“I’ll come back if I can but for where I’m going and what I’m going to do, returning would be surprise.” Just as she finished packing up and turned to leave… “Are you trying to get in my way?”

“I won’t pretend to understand nor try to stop you, but if your fate’s so sure it must at least lie outside these slums. I’m not asking you to take us all the way, but at least passed the gate would be good. You see we’ve got somewhere we must see as well.”

“Where to?”

“The academy of the Ardent Night.”

“Strange. Then were heading in the same direction, though I’d only be able to get you so far…”

“In that case my person might be of some help.”

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Nostalgia

“First Officer Hezran, Sir! That’s quite the sprain you have…trouble *falling over* again?”

“Well, you know us Earthy’s, we never quite got over our love for the ground.”

“That’s too bad. Some people can be just so wasteful, leaving there grudges lying left and right like that.” So the gatekeeper said, but he was one of the few people who would say as such and mean so honestly. It was one of the few reasons Hezran’s had felt even the slightest welcome on first arrival to his youth, and perhaps what kept him feeling even the slightest hope.

“Thanks for your concern, but it’s just a temporary cast. I’m sure you know our facilities as well as any. I was hoping to avoid taking my precious time off this way, but if I’m going to have it it’s better to take the quick fix.”

“True enough. Do you have you’re a badge?” Though they called it a badge it was more of a card lined with electronic circuitry imprinted according to its holder’s inborn talent and inclination.

“Unfortunately, it’s as you’ve guessed.”

“I’d really like to let you through but protocol states that you need to be ID’d to get on campus. It’s a big fuss I know.” More to worry about devilish pranks than actual terrorism to be sure.

“That’s too bad.” Hezran made a move of looking to his left and right as if unsure of what to do; after all it would be a *long* walk home.

“…I can issue a temporary pass, but you’d need to call someone on the inside. Usually they’re only for special occasions like the inauguration or ceremonies…to hell with it.”

“Then please. Iris, she should be here today. Iris Hazelburn.”

“A moment…” Even from beyond the glass Hezran could hear the individual rings of line the line…*bzzzt…bzzzt…bzzzt…click…*

“Yes, am I speaking with Iris Hazelburn. You have a guest waiting at the gate if you could take a look… Yes that’s quite right, so I’ll let him in? ...Yes, no problem ma’am. Thanks for your understanding.” Hanging up the receiver the gatekeeper pressed a few buttons on his keyboard and wheeled to the other side to wait as the passes printed. “One for you and… There you go. Please keep them on your bodies visible at all times. Any door’s you need you’ll be able to swipe along the way, though I’m sure you know the drill by now.” There were places restricted by each group and even more no one ever seen was allowed to go.

“Much appreciated.” Hezran held the card up to the door and watched the light turn green. “Thanks again.”

“You’re very welcome. Hey, if it’s not too much to ask, me and some of the others of the regular faculty are having a get-together later in the evening. I’m sure no one would mind having you there; even a friend or two.”

“Sorry. That’s kind of you, but unfortunately I don’t plan to stay long. We have other plans of late.”

“That’s too bad. It’s kind of late to say so, but it’s good at least to see you’re not alone. I mean, I know you have Iris and that other troublemaker…what’s his name?”

“Hal.”

“Yeah, that was it. Anyways, don’t be a stranger.”

“I’ll try not to.”

“See you later.”

“That would be nice.”

The gate closed behind leaving them stuck inside the fort along a short hallway of yellow stripes and barriers.

“I guess I shouldn’t be surprised.” Reise had done the job to patch his face, so that the line of fur lay hidden beneath a layer of false skin, albeit bruised to the look, but none of that would have mattered without an identity to claim.

“Both I and Hal attended, though he was a year above; Iris did as well. She’s a lot more different than the little girl you used to know…though not really.”

“Really…”

“Do you want to stop and visit?”

“You’re kidding, that would only cause her trouble.” The thought did interest her, but she had fallen from their graces and with what dangers she had planned, even a slight lapse could lead all sorts of troubles. No her goal laid farther on; beyond the edge of this dark tunnel she should hope.

Coming out beneath the sun, before them lay wide fields of open grass surrounded by simple, stony walkways before grandiose buildings carved of brick that stinked of paper powder and a touch of sweat.

Hezran took a nostalgic whiff of his campus of old. His memories here may have been painful but they weren’t all bad. During the day the courtyards were always lit, bright and full of sun. Even empty now, during breaks they would be full to the brim, but the times he really enjoyed coming out were those like this when they were completely empty and he could just lay down stranded to the tickling licks of the flitting artificial wind. And even then he wasn’t really alone. Sometimes they came by, and even just the smallest amount of simple company was often just enough to soothe the soul, even when he’d much rather just be left alone. At more festive times there would be nights for fireworks, even others stars to gaze aplenty, and while he’d have trouble out in open there was still the occasional bush he could hide himself to watch.

Over time, just as he felt now, walking along that woven granite path felt more comfortable than in the day. Over time this floating ground became almost as solid to him as his own below. Crossing beyond the hallowed bells and emptied windows cleaned of dust and beyond the dugouts and arenas where he had spent so many drowning days covered in the mud and through partially vacated dorms where few other sorrowful, eccentric souls locked themselves away behind closed muttering doors while their other peers had left away, they had nearly reached their goal a short distance to the side of those fettered fences shivering from the cataclysmic generators tucked safely in the hind.

Hezran and Reivyn both, they were looking for something in particular. Reise had told them Hal’s message, too full reluctantly, that a better hope had come to pass for Mai; and they were likely to find what they searched for in the boarded dwellings they’d just passed. However, searching would take time and he certainly didn’t want to cause his troubled counterpart any squalid rumors of predatory prowling of the cadet dorms to top things off. It was better to go straight to the source, Hezran was sure Iris could tell them where. Plus she deserved a visit.

Oddly enough the surroundings seemed somewhat louder than they usually were this time of year, the dull thuds they’d begun to hear inspiring less than confidence. And then there was a muffled yelp.

Hezran barely managed to grab Reivyn back from collar before she dashed towards the source—three-quarters mind to charge himself—only at this rate to find himself pulled in despite the case.

“Is that her?” Peeking over their shoulders Reise also caught a glimpse though Hezran was too preoccupied by the sight to answer her.

*Bear with it. We had a promise and we can’t afford to look any more suspicious than we already do.* For now at least, it seemed the violence ended at threats, the group surrounding happy enough to get their giggles picking their target into a corner.

It had always begun like that. Hezran remembered his many aches and pains. Sure the imprints left their damage, but it was the callous looks that always did the worst, there markings invisible beneath the many imprints often left openly on the skin in following. A funny look, a strange face, a misplaced word…misplaced being.

How long would it take them to realize that their little mouse trembled with rage more fear? Some laughter was already beginning to take a dangerous glint to eye.

*If they harm her…*

*If it comes to that I’ll join you too. We’ll have a righteous bloodbath.* Considering the wall crumbling beneath Hezran’s silent threat there might not even be that much left. So in the end it was fortunate for the prey as well that they never caught sight of bigger beasts before another interfered.

“It should be fine now.” Reise was eager to move on.

“You’re right. If bruises are still left at least there is space to share.” No matter how they wished, they weren’t ready. A temporary whisk dipped in tragedy suited no one to the end. *And friends…friends are something dear up here. …Now come on!*

They’d wasted enough time already. Since they’d found Mai they would be better off to start securing options—back to square one. It’d still be best to visit Iris. Knowing her Iris might be able to tilt some favors in the times left to come; not only that, but, always too much to Hezran’s amazement in the past, she had offered herself forth as practical trainer nearly every year: physical, strategy, terrain, armaments, you name it—even with her normal duties at the helm. With any luck she’d be able to tell them exactly how Mai had been doing since arrived.

Thinking back her office should be on the third floor of the barracks close to the school’s edge—a place with good vantage of the training grounds.

*Hey, so do you have a place there too then?* While happy she was interested, Hezran couldn’t help but think he might have tried a bit harder in the past.

*Apparently the latrines were good enough for me and at least I got a solid desk, though it stunk; too much at times. Truth was as long as I didn’t get in the way of her work Iris was happy enough to let me have a corner, but all the weird looks she’d end up get sent me back retreating to my own.* Hal himself had always pitched a tent around the back, part of his measured methods of defiance. Too bad it was always so disorganized and buzzing with insects—it was hard enough just to stay and sleep. *…There really wasn’t much choice left in the end.*

*Huh… Is that so…*

“Well here we are: The crossroads.” They’d arrived at the place between two separate destinations. Twisting to the left led to Hezran’s former place of work. Straight up north was a more gated destination. “Promise me you won’t be too rough.”

“I’ve still got my old keys to get in thanks to special favors called back in. Still, it won’t take much to realize I’m out of place, especially getting closer to the center. Beyond that I leave my fate to Ard.” And the Ardent knew just how forgiving they were towards unwanted intruders. Even the guards never made it much further inside, but the pained howls and slipping of drapes upon the cages were more than enough to tell that what lay inside was more dangerous than without.

“Don’t go rushing to your death.” Whatever her goals Reise seemed determined enough to bet it all.

“You’re one of the last people that should be telling others that.” No words would stop her brazen turn towards the entrance where a white spread maw accepted her return in secret, down a descending staircase, vanishing out of reach.

Hezran and Reivyn waited for a moment, tentatively, perking ears for alarm or worse—they could do at least that much—before making for their own. Beyond this each could only trust their own, and hope.

There was a bit of an adrenaline spike that jittered Hezran’s belly in heading back into his old home. Ascending a further distance inside the building they found themselves before a heavy door, the muffled clicking of keys sounding out from just behind. Pulled towards and back again. He’d have to be careful not to tremble as he knocked.

Before Hezran got his chance, a pair of ordered heels strutted from behind the door to prod it open and beyond another hand reached out towards his own that made extend too far. Her grip was strong, and always unyielding. “You were always like that weren’t you?”

“Were?” To her it hadn’t been all that long since they last met. In truth it hadn’t been all that long in actuality. Hezran had only caught glimpse of a frailer side by being a stranger.

“…Bad time?” From the looks of it she was in the depths of paper, stacked high enough to block the light.

“Not bad per se, I just think in times like these the training they need lies more in mental than in physics; discipline as well.” Fiddling with a pen tucked back to ear. “Whenever I’m not looking they’re quick to start their petty fights. It’s not just the trainees--I’d really like to whip some of our instructors into shape just as well. Why can’t they understand that we’re all the same? Something so simple.”

*All the same…* She would always say it aloud and open just like that. It was probably that one sole thought that had saved him from corruption and that had kept him remembering the fragility and rationality that equally inflicted all. Needless to say, her views were held eccentric; they held no sway within this castle in the sky except for those who chose to follow. But it wasn’t pointless. At the very least there would be those like him and weirds like her that would rally beneath the flag.

“But that’s beside the point. I thought I hadn’t seen you lately, though I’m happy you’d come visit. I don’t know what kind of scraps you’ve gotten into this time, though taking a look I’d have thought you’d head straight to the infirmary and be on your way. Even if they’re pricks about it at least they’d do their job.”

“Ah…” He had been like that hadn’t he? Avoiding. Though he didn’t realize quite how long. The things he realized now with hindsight. “Sorry, about that. H—I’m usually such a shy guy, but you already know I don’t mean it that way—and feel free to drag me down if you have to. Just right now, there are a few things I absolutely have to talk with you about.”

“Color me surprised. So what is it?”

“Have you seen what Hal’s been up to lately?” That was the other reason they had come. It was worrisome that Hal had still kept contact with an outside group; from the looks of it with the same intent as he had started. Hezran was hoping to get another view.

“Why? Is up to something stupid again?”

“Stupid… I don’t know if I’d call it that. I’m afraid he really might just get himself killed this time.” In fact Hezran knew it for a fact.

“With him it was bound to happen one of these days but…” She stole one glance into his eyes before speaking up again. ”You’re serious aren’t you?”

“Deadly.”

“I have noticed him sneaking around as such and his record’s far from perfect, just above the point where they’d think of dismissing him for the gutter in fact. It’s almost an art hoew he manages to just barely stay afloat. I’d even thought I might have seen him heading plainclothes down to the slums, but i didn’t think much of it at the time. Abnormal, but it’s not exactly a crime.”

“When was that exactly?”

“Around three in the morning. I came on down…to take a walk.” From those rare dark circles that showed themselves as she briefly stretched her arms it must have been just last night.

*He couldn’t just give up after all—I mean it should have been obvious… Idiot!* If only Hezran knew more, maybe he could do something.

“Besides, don’t you think you’re acting a little strange yourself…?” Sharp as ever, enough to bring Hezran’s bristles to the very edge. At the very least it seemed she hadn’t put her finger on the pulse quite yet.

“Well…you know what pain and pills do to a person… That and running into a rather ugly sight along the way.”

“Something about your guest?” Iris narrowed her eyes suspiciously. Of course, he was going to have to explain that too.

“Not quite, in fact it was her friend. She seemed to be pretty frantic coming in around the grounds, so I had to stop and look, though things were solved before I came. Still what bruises left behind were less than pretty; I’d hope you’d keep a special eye on the girl—I think she said her name was Mai—for me.”

“That’s fine but why not yourself?”

“Do you really think things would get any better if I did?”

“It’d be better if you tried!”

“Your right, but you’d do a better job of it, we both know. In exchange I’ll do any one thing you ask of me. Please! Not just for me, but for her…” Hezran bowed down as if to take all fours as a dog prostrated before its mulling master. Reivyn didn’t move one inch from where she stood. While it was a slight bit pitiful, something he’d never have stooped before, a bit of humility was a small price to pay for safety.

“You’ve changed.” For all the differences between Iris and Hal, they said the same things. “The way you are now…in honesty I’m not sure it’s for the better.” There was something about her tone, a slight bit disparaging but with a hint of blush, that hinted at something more. He couldn’t be sure she didn’t know.

“That’s…unfortunate. Then for your benefit I’ll tell at least that, something this changed me understands more than any other come before, is as to exactly how blind I was back then.” The words would leave needles in both his heart and side, but he felt they were something better not left unsaid. “In the end you really are the loveliest woman in my sphere.”   
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Message

“Is something wrong?” It had only been a moment since the others student fled—it wouldn’t have been strange for Mai to feel fear, but the delay was far too long. Following the lingering gaze led not to fleeing backs but to an empty shadow and a few cracks in the stone wall tracing at existence. “Again?”

Mai nodded. There was nothing to say for sure but her expression was already enough to tell. She was glad her new friend knew her so well. “They looked so similar I couldn’t help it—this time I’m not so sure.” Tracing the wall with her hands she noticed a small object at her feet tied with a piece of familiar string.

“The tracks leave towards the offices. I’m sure we could catch them if we gave chase.”

“No…I appreciate it.” Mai appeared a bit absentminded calling her new friend back, her eyes seeming to stare at times beyond the string hanging in her grasp. “It’s better we go back. My mind’s just playing tricks on me.”

“I guess I’ll let it go, but…You sure seem calm. What exactly did it read?”

“Nothing much. I guess it’s just not time. Not quite yet.”

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Purge

It was as good time as ever, walking through those shadowed halls, unusually quiet for the time of year. The few she had run across already barely gave a second look, and only a few more barriers lay between her and the one she sought.

*Now for the real test.* With one hand to the reader Reise peered through the hollow lens. There came a whir as a scanning beam of light stared back to hers. Would it work or was it all a trap? Was it a distraction to set his plan in motion? Hal was certainly the type to do it and she would never have tested her luck without the current bait. She could feel her pulse grow faster as the beam turned red, then yellow…then finally blue.

When the platform slipped away beneath her she nearly tripped, managing to clutch the railing in order to prevent a quicker descent. She had never liked this part, the sinking feeling of a single slab of steel floating through the empty space. Even then, the passing air sounded whispers that she might fall on forever.

A sudden jerk to left and the platform clicked into place before a single cylinder, the only exit leading straight down to the surface. It was a precaution—a single drop was all it took—not only for the monsters kept that became to fierce but also for eliminating those who came too sympathetic or otherwise having fallen out of use. The small square on which she stood was the only path to escape; should it not be otherwise controlled.

As a cartridge in its home, the outer signals slowly lit and the armored carapace began to lower its guard, revealing the core which lay inside—a white, bright room. In its very center lay a glassy capsule surrounded by countless tubes and filled with mist, the numbering on its side the same as that burned in her memories from that very day. Reise put her fingers to the glass, just as she had back then at the first time she had been let into the depths, subject to some of the deepest, closest darkness of Freyr’s moon.

*Congratulations! You are one of the very few to make it this far and to be entrusted with this task. There are high hopes. It would be so good of you not to disappoint.*

Just like that they’d shown her in, to this very capsule at that very time. What waited for her then wasn’t some monstrous creature of any sort, just a naked human body stripped of all humanity. Its eyes were empty; it only seemed to stand because its body told it could. Curious enough to look, but empty enough to feel nothing. Like a newborn at maturity.

Clear tubes plugged straight into its back as if it was some sort of biological machine, and the incision scars around the chest revealed worse suffering. Jailed without being chained with the only sanctity coming from a lack of knowing, understanding. And the blood-red button at her side, laced with ivory, not being one of death but grosser pain.

*For this test there is only one thing that’s needed. Press the button. The core has already been installed. We’ve even took the luxury to remove the breathing receptacles, though I can’t imagine why to fear the screams. It will be interesting to see how it recovers.*

There was a darkened patch, slightly lumped and entwined by crusted veins. It seemed to pulse as if a second heart; a parasite waiting to take over just in need of feeding.

*What’s the matter? Is it broken; or perhaps there is something else?*

A cold sweat still ran down her spine, the gaze unseen slowly turning her subject from student. Despite herself her fingers left the glass to trace the cursed knob. Her fingers slipped around the cooling circle as she felt the edge where metal melded with plastic, but never to the point of passed. Teardrops fell from her eyes and they only elicited a sigh.

*Perhaps we should leave this for another time.* Had it all been an act to push her on? Before relief set in, the speakers echoed the sound of other fingers tapping before the travelling surface split from floor to rise, leaving Reise alone accompanied by a red denying blink. *Three chances that’s all you get. Come to terms without attachment. Solace has its way. Remember it is you or them. If you want to escape from this blasted hole you’ll do exactly as is said.*

Alone… But at least she’d had some company. In hindsight that might have been the worst.

It just stood motionless, unmoved. She rapped the glass but it twitched and nothing more. Maybe it really was just a machine.

The light eked in from the tunnel below was barely enough to see and fading. Her stomach growled louder before a package from above floated down to sate her hunger; small and dry and just a touch pungent. Not very appetizing.

Before she knew it the thing had reached the glass. Its nose twitched a little, perhaps the last remaining dredges of a more animal instinct. Small clearness leaked from its mouth.

In truth there was no need to give it anything. Even without food it got all the nutrients it needed—indeed probably a healthier balance than her own. Still, its stomach was flat and sunk almost to the point of nonexistence…it couldn’t hurt to let it have a taste.

She wondered how many days had passed like that. It was almost soothing in the dark—less complicated—and like a child, though slowly, it had begun to learn, if only just enough to write with fog beyond the glass.

Each time when the watchers came, Reise couldn’t press the button with both her and the experiment pretending silence even nothing could be hidden. No word was said or passed until the final time of split parting, when she was forced to watch the change. If she didn’t trigger a response, they would use her response as a trigger of their own.

*I suppose it was a thing worth testing.*

Reise wished she hadn’t heard, and especially not seen, that last sight that haunted her dreams.

Dumped from heights, but not so much to die, all that remained were the promises from both sides. To remain and try. To return in time. Both to stay alive.

It had been so long. And now who knew if they remained the same? How many times they had been changed? They had promised they’d wait forever, but…how long was ever for them.

Her hand slid down to touch the console and the flow of mist began to cool. When the pod’s screen finally rose she saw more animal than what remained. As a crying wolf it sniffled, fur-covered and with jagged teeth. Sleepy tears removed from eyes, its yawn seemed more a howl than peaceful lies.

It stood on two legs, both with claws at feet, leaving scratches on the bottom surface as it approached the glass. A heavy mist fogged up the surface as it twisted its head to get a better glimpse beyond that long, long nose. Its mouth clacked; a small whimper devoid of human sound. Eyes seemed fogged and swirled—from recognition, or feral curiosity?

Its pointy hand lifted up towards the fog—there was a sudden alarm and red flashing to startle both their eyes. She needed to press the button quick, the other that would release, before it was shut down. No run would last long, but a short glimpse of freedom, even futile and tinted with blood…her only desire.

She could feel other lights chasing them down. The tunnel getting louder. And with her click…

It was a different sort of alarm, flashing yellow warning to step back. But it may all as well have been the same. Whether because she’d been naively fooled or her steps had come too late—she could only watch as the floor beneath the other side broke to two sides, ripping the furry form that counted on its state from the stagnant tubes embedded through gravity’s unstoppable pull.

It wasn’t just one; the sounds of plummeting could be heard from all around. And soon enough she felt her feet slip out beneath her.

When they finally reached her, clinging to the glass along with silent streams of screams, she had nothing left to give resistance to their simple pulls—and maybe her desires laid below, even as the scratched out fog told her clumsily all she needed to know.

If it wasn’t for that clawed arm that dragged her up with hints of whispered wind.

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Form the Darkness

“I’d thought for sure it would have been the end.” All that commotion, the alarm bells ringing, and the sudden drops. It was hard to imagine everything would end so silently, with her safe and back at home, in her dismal, dungy hole.

Hezran had thought the same; nearly panicked when he heard the bells. This wasn’t how he’d remembered it to have gone… In his other past there hadn’t been so much as an utter before the fateful night.

Now this, with a terrible noise to funnel their escape. Without that or Reivyn’s wind they’d never been able to get so close and back. Even then it was awfully quiet, the path too clear and easy. It was worrying, especially given what Balbus had to say to warn once they’d returned.

“Everything’s been pushed so far ahead.” In thought it was natural. One disturbance would leave guards raised; at first in one place and next in others. Hal’s true goal lied far enough away, but with too much time let passed and the bulwarks would grow too strong—if Hal did not find himself caught before.

No. It was premature and there was no longer any time left to wait. He would surely think it was better to strike while the guard was left still thin.

“So, what about you? Do you still have the intent to participate?”

“Honestly… I’m not completely sure.” The point for her participation had already been lost, and Reise seemed somewhat apathetic to the matter. “You know Hal told us all what might happen if we’d stayed to the end—it hardly mattered. Even in terms of guarantees human psychology isn’t pliable enough to change to certain views at whim, their wills to spite unshaken; however noble or misguided they may’ve been.”

It was more than true. Even Hezran had trouble taking his future past into consideration and now that things had bent off path it only made him more uncertain. Was this timeline once the same? Was the past the same? And the future? How many items had been changed?

…What was there left for them to still rely on?

This wasn’t even the first time it had changed. Even as blinded to his surroundings as he had been, Hezran knew enough to know. His new life had intersected with too many others to stay the same. Moving both up and down below; both good and bad. But now…now things felt too much like a theatrical on the stage. No matter which soul caused, or what other was causing?

It would be reckless to rely on just his knowledge to charge straight forward, but there was nothing else Hezran had. That and his sense of right and intuition and as to that which he must protect, a category that grew wider by the second.

Either way the world wouldn’t wait to match his scale. Already Balbus had left to make the preparations. According to his word of message the strike would be at fortnight, and already one week and six days had passed.

*Hal…was this really what you wanted.* It seemed as if Hezran’s warnings had failed to sway, at least in so far as passing. Knowing his friend well, even if the reason had been believed, Hal might still have gone ahead, but not even with willing sacrifices on the line. Hal should have least have waited—was this really all enough to push him over edge. *No. There’s no point of thinking this now but rather what we should really do…*

*Then stop worrying. You said there was no point, but you just can’t help but running circles. Listen to your Heart! …Sometimes the simple answer is all you need.*

Already the sounds of countless footsteps could be heard stomping by—the gathering of a storm. They could choose to remain in the eye or struggle as they were caught in the cyclone’s turns. It would be easy enough to remain silent and so stay forever more, pretending to be caught in the whims of planning for lack of courage to face his fears. Ability was doubtful and shortening time was more… The constant thoughts that ran amidst his head.

But… *You’re right.* With even Reivyn spurring him along there was no way Hezran could step down now, no matter the bad feelings. To be just a little bit closer to the him he wanted to be—to show to her and others.

“Going?”

“Right.”

Reise put down her clipboard to take both bag and bat, leaving stray bandages along the way.

Turning the crumbled corner and through the broken steel plating the marching mob seemed just as a stream, swift and unyielding. One foot forward and they’d all be swept away.

…A moment’s hesitation stayed Hezran’s hand until the blares of sirens in the distance—before Hezran knew he had already stepped his way into the flow dragging the others with him. The towering gates that lied in the distance; who knew if a hole would surface near the base.

--

What Evil Left Behind

“This isn’t what was promised.”

“Oh, and I thought it turned out rather well for you? Escaping with so little harm is hardly what one would expect from such a coming.”

“But… Did you really have to go so far! There are worse pains to lose than life.”

“Oh believe me…I know.” It brought a smile to his sunken eyes. “I’m more surprised you’d dare raise your voice as such to me. Have you no fear—to say such a thing to your king.” Delusional. This man had always been this way, clouded eyes seeing some imaginary world that only came for them—real enough to blast of others; for the shortest time of knowing.

How had he managed to get caught in the web of this fake spider sticking the blackest strings that held him down by the skin? Hal had only intended to make use of it at first.

“As long as she lays low nothing will happen.” *She will suffer eternally.*

--

Dredge

Already the swarm had reached the gates; no doubt their wardens waiting just outside. The bees raised their stingers to the sky and hacked away in turn, only stopping once their pincers cracked from force. Whether to wait until they tired or bother only once they breached to threat…a small time had been bought.

Unbeknownst to all of waiting and perhaps even much of the mobbing crowd that rushed toward, spare bodies filtered out the side, more than one wearing a film of dirt far to clean to have joined in sufferance. It was possible some other noticed. Even then the flags were already hoisted—a long held rage stoked to blinding fervor.

It was a struggle against the waves to reach the gap. Sometimes it felt it might be good to be swept on with—take part in the ferocious roars. Who knows what he might have done before?

Reivyn was the first to reach the edge. Hezran gave her a little push to set her free. Now for his turn… Where had she gone? Before he realized Reise had been left somewhere down along.

Hezran took his eyes to the crowd, scanning amidst the frenzied faces. Their constant bobbing and swarming faces made an infernal difficulty; but soon enough he spotted a calmer life amidst the steam.

As the bubbling waters flowed around her she stood stock still forward. What was she thinking? He couldn’t know for sure, but… *Wait for me here.*

Hezran stepped back into the flow, struggling but never quite reaching. When Reise realized she was being followed she turned a wry smile towards his gaze. The noise made it difficult to hear her words, even across a single arm’s length of distance. At times he had to mouth them to completion, reading the passage of her lips.

“I’ve decided to stay. The drunkards and druggies, downcast and downtrodden… It’s been so long. They’re all I have left. Without someone to keep beating them into shape they’ll just fall back into the gutter. Even if I only mange for a few.”

In a way it was gladdening. Far safer her be here than exposed to the other danger, despite what toll she had taken and the risks of being caught. “Then wait for us. Through what might occur we will definitely return, whether in silence or with a bang. I’m sure we’ll also be relying on you as patients once again. …Hopefully in a place one better than today.”

“That would be a nice dream.” Dreams of promises turned yet not but empty. Merged once again with the sodden crowd, Hezran’s lost the trail of Reise’s back before he turned away.

By the time he swam back to Reivyn’s side a fresh layer of dust had almost settled on the ground. Only a few stragglers beckoned from beyond the gap. No doubt they figured the two just another pair of them and intended to guide together, but… Hezran swept his hand to side to indicate for them to go on ahead.

*We’ve still got that other one to deal with don’t we?*

*That’s right.* There was a need for them to make a small detour before the goal.

--

From the Other Side

Tossing and turning in his bed. That was all he could do for the late to early hours. He couldn’t sleep and nightmares haunted him awake. And then he’d heard the noise.

He knew it wasn’t for him to say, but too much strange had happened as of late. There were the telling words of a friend and the strange askings of another. Worse, while he had been away, was the troubled occasion at the laboratory he knew only from the curtained cages wheeled in with muffled screeches and twisted limbs poking out from just within.

He couldn’t bear it anymore; he had needed some air and quiet so he’d simply left his squalid corner of a dwelling that had only recently turned a little brighter. It wasn’t that long ago he’d been visited by his sister yet again—Why the thought of it made him dizzy?—the once shy youth seemed strangely assertive as she stirred. A bit of shadow lied over her face; with warnings hinting at things she shouldn’t know.

He hadn’t had any intention of going anywhere. But was his home really all it made to eye?

From his pocket he felt the pager ring; the growing ruckus no doubt hinting at the cause. He couldn’t even find some peace to rest. No doubt he would receive reprimand on return. Still, his feet never stopped. They slowly took him away from the central noise, heading somewhere slighter, sinister with the hinting smell of smoke.

He climbed the rungs to gain some vantage and lied across the surface of a nearby roof; not up towards the stars but flat and forward to look across the ground. Quite a distance but he still had clear view—enough to see the flitting shadows sneak across the gate. Sparks burned before lights blinked brokenly above the segment entrance before it rose. There were the blares of sirens from far off—likely racing to the slums. It was far too early for the alarms to sound but for betrayal or stupidity; unsettling enough without such perturbing acts.

It wouldn’t be long now and likely pointless to watch for more. Should he be caught nearby…

The scuffling that entered his ears yet another thing that came too soon, too close. Sounds amongst the lonely night had their ways of working the greatest fears upon the mind. The moment one turned their head to calm themselves always seemed so slow. So yet be stranger that the real surpassed the fake.

A hallucination? Did he really want to separate himself from him that much? The image seemed more than solid enough. Maybe it was a good thing the blackness overcame so soon.

--

Young Soul

Running through the shadows of the night a constant stream of words whispered to her ears in loops. The voice was arrogant and haughty by manufacture and emotionless in rendering, but always seemed demeaning in how it dared to dream she might forget. Still, the cold-grown girl half-turned woman felt nothing of annoyance. Her once fleshy face showed only the mechanisms that lay beneath, yet unseen beneath her mask.

There was a disturbance in the air that she reflected. Another smell of sulfur she ignored. Her only goal lied straight ahead. The very ground might light up around her, but unless sideways joined the front…it might as well be dead.

So when the sulfur in the air smelt silent she failed to notice. And when the new smell unknown came level she treated it the same—that she didn’t realize that everything had changed. So she thought: Though it always had the right, maybe the heckling voice was indeed right.

--

Puppet Bomb

*Was it okay to just leave him there?* Reivyn had a point. They’d just stuck the body in a nearby bin, stinky and cramped—not much chance of being searched but still close by. Even if the night passed unperturbed, slinking through the street covered in peels and rotted globs of fat was unpleasant even at the quietest of times.

*Every second counts. Besides I’m sure he’ll figure something out when he wakes up.* Most importantly if they managed to deal with the task at hand—well, one way or another at least he’d never have to watch. *Either way I don’t want to see again.*

What would be the method? He knew little but what he did had left less doubt as to how to treat it. Given how quick they’d been to discard her in the last past’s future, merely kicking his sister out of the way would only serve to accelerate demise. Then perhaps the source was best. That and it would also be best to keep their cards and faces close at hand.

Fragmented memories jumbled like shrapnel inside Hezran’s head—painful—and before he knew they’d already passed the gate with the images of possibilities having barely taken form. *Curses…*that they’d only seemed so vivid within dreams. He would just have to be thankful that at the very least they’d got in ahead of the explosion. There were little scratches of rubble here and there, but the central barrier intact and silent; neither people right in front nor coming from behind.

*Something’s wrong…* Hezran had been too wrapped up in cinder chains that Reivyn had need to tell him. While little strange that footsteps went unheard, for a place that glimpsed of peril it was far too quiet for its size.

Looking in from the outside within his memory it had almost seemed that Hal’s group had been pushed back with ease, except here given present state of things, *The resistance is too little.* Were the little terrors that occurred nearby really enough to make things so easy? *How nice that would be if true.*

But doubts didn’t stop the bodies pouring in. They were making an emboldened ruckus, enough to make his worries look deceived. As the light switched green from red, even the building seemed to welcome them in. Nonchalant, even slow to walk, it was almost a surprise that any of them had made it through at all.

*Too strange.* And now that he had a chance to watch them all Hezran realized someone missing from their numbers. “Where’s Hal?” Hezran had raised his voice so they could here, but they seemed far too preoccupied to listen—so much it seemed as though the words never reached their ears. And as if to choose that exact moment to push them along, the alarms rang off.

*Are we going?* Despite the chill of mind it felt they had no choice, almost as if they were a group of blinded sheep being herded towards a malicious, spike-filled pen, where for all the clamor the lines formed surprisingly neat.

Hanging at the end of the dock over a howling gust of air were their goals, stashed tightly in rows between three platform arms. The hatches were already open; their controls waiting for their riders to take wheel.

“Is it really alright to leave just like this?!” Hezran voiced concern again, struggling to be heard above starting engines splutters. Those few that looked back…it seemed as though their eyes were almost grinning. Even as they were swallowed by a thunderous blast.

Time cut even shorter. Behind them a stalker dressed in black, masked from head to toe, on its hand a spotted gauntlet still sparking from discharge.

Some cowered, but none shivered. They seemed hardly panicked beyond the quaking of their feet that bounced amidst the shockwaves as they carried their slumping bodies towards bigger blasts. No sooner had a few more sat their seats than a second black-robed hand pointed them towards their deaths. Another bolt of lightning—the crumpled steel of the floating ground barley covering up the vehicles in time.

A slight shake could be felt within the air as the figure lifted both her hands. A ball of thunder formed and quivered, pulsing larger than a globe. Larger. And larger. Something that would leave more than fragile burns along its path. To burn through Reivyn’s makeshift barrier along with every pair of slanted wings it hid.

Enough to force a stand.

Shot like a cannon’s ball but fortunately its girth was more than show. The hairs on Hezran’s neck frizzed with the approach and scraps of idle metal seemed attracted to the fatal sight, growing a metallic sludge of plasma as they touched.

Hezran wouldn’t let those bloodied pair of hands be stained another speck.

Catching the right moment, as the inches separating shortened ever thinner, Hezran rotated the blade within palm of his hand imaging first a bloated circle and then that bloated circle making wrap around. As the strands of black extended, it was as if a black hole was sucking in a bursting star amidst collapse—to dense to capture all at once.

He was…exhausted. Another shot could very well be last. Not enough to block the second bolt that burned his way and seared his flesh, thankfully much smaller than any last. The largest blast seemed to have drained her just as much has him.

That did not seem to be enough though. It already was unnatural that she’d managed to shoot so much and still Everyn didn’t intend to let silent. One and two more—this time Reivyn had more than enough power left to block them. The black suit depressed in places, as if the flesh that lied beneath it was sucked hungrily for each remaining slighter blow. If this continued there would be really nothing left, not so much as the comatose corpse that had haunted Hezran in the past.

Hezran charged forward trying to reach her, no other thoughts in mind. What he could do then he didn’t know. He might be able to lock her enfeebling body in a hold, but the will that drove her was something far from grasp—he still didn’t understand why she had chosen as such. …And in the end he didn’t need to.

“Hhmhmhahaha…\*cough\*\*screech\*” A disembodied voice. Its tenor was enough to bring a chill, the pain of creeping ice along Hezran’s heated spine; enough to freeze the buzzing arms he held into a silent shiver; thankfully quieted. Unnatural, put of place, and far too much at home. “Oh I apologize for interrupting…it was just too much to keep my breath—that a staged scene could work quite so well! We really must thank our benefactors shouldn’t we?”

That was all it took: Even shivering fell silent, limp within his arms. Without the struggle Hezran could at last lift his sister up into a carry, but a single look around revealed all the strings. Not a single other puppet dared to step; only splaying loose arms hung deep below their gummy grins. …Maybe what he held was just as well.

Hezran felt a wisp of wind curve along his neck, a slight tinkle in its passing. The silver glint of a needle, the black at its very tip seeming to squirm as if alive—a familiar taint.

“Well, not that I’d expected it to work in any case. Still, it is a pity; it would have been nice having another useful tool. I reckon a bit of torture from conceiving hands would be all it took to draw it out.” It was becoming clearer. The voice…Hezran knew the voice. He remembered it from their ascent of the two towers—and a nagging emotion from depths far in his past. “Perhaps this will work just as well.”

That emotion was dread. An everlasting, all-capturing dread. So much it felt like the chains had never left. And from behind the gate the zombie of his fears stalked in on twisted feet, a steady *click, click, click* seeping from the chest, as the entrance closed behind it.

Where was the bright and the vivid? This was not the man Hezran once knew, the one Hezran had begrudgingly looked to for guidance in harsh life. It was just a pale corpse, all joints bent and it slithered forward empty-eyed as if a comedic death god come for reaping, begriming laughter accompanying each step seeming to boom on from high above, “In my opinion, everything is better when you end it with a bang!”

Beneath the fragile strands of cloth and further past torn skin, spots of ghoulish red formed numbers—a silent countdown to tick away more lives. No further communication needed, both Hezran and Reivyn rushed further into the bay. Already one column had burst in flames, but at least some others still remained.

“Oh, how cold! to not even squint upon the sight. I’m sure he’d be teared if he were alive.” A mocking whimper emanated from behind, two small thuds accompanying in theatre. “Come, now. Won’t you stay?”

Weighted down, first from the arms and then legs, Hezran’s tread was brought to stiffen as heavy leaden grasps attacked his waist. When he shook they shook with him. When he turned they spun around. His only thanking was that they didn’t bite, just hugged—and were all the more terrifying for it. What was left was kick—

“How cruel! What monstrosity! You would trade their warmth for pain. Pray don’t break their beating hearts.”

In truth he felt their pulse, rumbling just above the skin. The intoxication in their eyes laid it not their fault. Trampling on others as trampling had on him—the very last thing he wanted. Naïve thoughts: It might have been good to drag them to the end, their heavy weight a responsibility forced upon him, but a responsibility nonetheless—the claim of fault that lied with him.

There was the sing of a refreshing breeze, sharp enough to cut the grass like weeds. Hezran didn’t look back. He had that responsibility to look to the person waiting up in front of him.

His boots made a squelch as he joined Reivyn in the cockpit. As the hatch lowered to shut out the constant giggling one arm stuck in, then two, and then a head; all the way up to the creaking chest—enough pressure to squeeze even the coldest juice from the smallest holes of its can.

They didn’t have time to flee. There was nowhere left to flee. Without touching the central panel the hang gave way to air and turbulence…only to be blotted out so bright and red, white splattered amidst the bed, as they fell on back to earth yet once again.

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Nightmare?

*This again?* Burning landscapes and broken buildings. The sights around him were all too familiar, both in reality and his dreams, but here there was something… *This—it isn’t me?*

The feeling may have been similar, but the perspective was different. It felt as if he were a ghost trapped to object, having failed to possess. Unlike in other dreams, he was fully conscious and aware, and at the same time powerless to do anything but watch the scenery flash around beside him.

*There it is!* Another voice, or was it a thought—Hezran couldn’t tell. It was a bit boyish, though clearly different from his own, the distance making it seem as if it came from none other than himself. Now that he thought, it was strange that the cracklings of the flames besides and their heat were left to nothing but imagination. So why just this one? For what the source?

The answers wouldn’t wait.

Unperturbed by the surrounding turmoil, his vessel carried him towards the flames, past the screaming living and through the silent dead. The object that appeared but a slanted tower in the distance quivered ever so slightly. The earth quaked and the fire flared. A single dot of purple gleamed amidst the darkness, its gaze concentrated towards them, following them closer, until an unmeasurable object reached up into the sky as if to swat an irritating bug from sight. Struggle as he might, the body that entrapped him left him like a fly trapped in glue, unable to even close his eyes—just watch—as the bludgeon made descent; as his vision was covered in black.

Seemingly out of nowhere a dozen bright blue lights shattered in the sky. Infinite shining shards pierced through the descending hand and froze to join together, sending a glacial encasement up along the length. The shine began to fade away revealing a silver-grey wolf howling from its icy perch, noble and graceful even in ferocity.

As it stared back towards them it gave a lighter growl, as if addressed a friend or child. Hezran felt a growing sense of nostalgia, unsure of where it placed, or to whom it would belong.

He must of smiled back, perhaps adding a few witty words by the by. The wolf held a weary grin for but a moment. The two of them communicating, polar opposites and best of friends. Even if the entire world was covered whole by frozen flames he betted it would be the same. A frozen eternity just for them.

Small cracks began to form amidst the ice. It was only a matter of time before the enemy would break free. The hourglass began to show its seams.

The wolf’s claws pawed a spot to show the place, an invisible hand carving a small ring free from ice. Directed by their friend the vessel of Hezran’s consciousness charged forward, courageous even as countless glacial chips were splashed towards them. With the next moment the captured palm broke free…by that time it was already far too late.

In the blink of an eye a second circle was carved, expertly removing a blot of shadowy mass. Before the icicles had a chance to reach the ground the entirety they once captured had vanished to thin air and left only a single portion severed in his hand, evaporated to a single shining stone radiant with life. A great triumph…one that left his vision blurred.

As that free-spirited haughtiness turned to somber sorrow the feeling of soft fur reached his face and a small roughness nuzzled to his nose, before his dreams swept him to sleep once more.

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Beneath the Stars

Hezran’s head felt split and his lips as if crackling, burning dry; more than just from heat. As he opened his eyes, he found even fluttering lids to be as weighed as stone. Through his caked vision, he saw the black night sky covered with glittering stars and a black, obtrusive orb lain out beneath yet never so far out of reach. Even the ground seemed to glitter countless colors, a scene mystic enough to think passed death, but that sight could never be mistaken. *So…I’m still alive.*

Of course he was. He had already died countless times. But what of the others—the most important things to him.

Feeling returning to the tips, Hezran found his arms splayed out to the side and his fingers grazing other flesh. He grasped it with his right; it was stiff, but far to light, so little as to lift with ease. A dismembered arm. It wouldn’t have been strange for one or two to fall along, but the fear was palpable enough to nearly draw a bloody sweat out from his arid husk.

Pushing himself to foot he found himself amidst a scrapyard, countless parts both steel and less. The cracked stones in-between seemed as precious jewels. *Reivyn!* Where could she be? Too far for her to hear him, however made the case? It was a long way to the ground.

Near or far? He hardly had the strength to lift the plates, but that’s not what made it harder. Maybe that’s why he started at near the edges—because he was too afraid of finding worst news close.

*No…* He was lying to himself. In fact he had already seen their feet, even just. He had to steel himself to free the cat, or else he would never know lest to doom himself. Half-buried through the rock and charred black at sides, spotted from impacts and still flexible from warmth, prying the plate free above the legs first came the torso and then the neck; finally the head. Any closer and it would have shaved more than hair.

The two girls were twined together, breaths so silent they could not be heard. Putting his hands to the foreheads he found one hot and the other cold, both pulses run at equal pace.

*Drip, drip, drip.* Hezran hadn’t even noticed. The rain fell like a godsend for parched skin and for a while he couldn’t help but stare, tears finally slipping through his eyes even if from above. The sting felt pleasant.

A rumble from the sky brought his mind back from peace. The pace of the downpour quickened, already dragging at his clothes. A reminder yet again all how easily the greatest gifts turned foul, without care of their recipients might to catch cold or fell to worse disease.

Despite the straight cliffs edge, narrow to each side, there was no place to hide. More so the ravine acted like a funnel carrying downward streams into its depths. The one ship’s skeleton formed a simple crevice and it seemed dry enough inside, though a place that smelled of death. Lifting the two girls a lightly as he could Hezran shuffled to the metal tent. If it was any fortune at least the rain made dull the smell. He could only hope the narrow stream that formed wouldn’t overflow.

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Together

*Wake up, wake up…*

She was conscious, but her eyes were closed.

*She is awake, has awoken…*

Despite it she saw lights, as if another world existed sole within her mind. Had she made it through her goal?

*Still you live, still living…*

The fact that it was not merely black; she had the hint, but was it truly possible.

*Not alone, together… Borrowed, helped you…*

Who?’

*You know us well, we know you better…*

The background gradually took shape. Now that she saw it was a familiar place, one she’d visited once a time before. And in it new stars shone, lights of red and green and blue and brown, and silver slowly taking form. A red salamander, a green hawk, a blue snake, twin brown deer, and a familiar silver giant; their glows of shades she knew.

*Care for us, we care for you… Muddied, but regained…*

She was…thankful. With the last strands of darkness that evaporated from entwined, they’d finally taken form—remembered. But still her eyes grew shadowed from their shine.

*You sleep too long and the light goes dim, you will not be able to return…*

Somehow that didn’t seem so bad. If only it wasn’t for the nagging conscious at the back.

*You cannot! You must free our kind from torment!*

Angry? Seems like too much effort.

*Revenge for our race; eradication of their race as they have unto ours. They killed us out of fear; we must show them what happens when you anger the fearsome.*

Was she the one angry now? Somehow she felt the less to listen.

*Humans! Human! It was a mistake.*

*Shut up!* It was fine up to then, until one step too far was taken in her silence. Her lethargy was gone and her sight undimmed. She was ablaze, filled right up to sails, and the unsubstantial beings flickered in her presence.

*That’s exactly right!* A new intruder, but they seemed to have no source, not one that she could see, perhaps behind; if anything the source was something deep within herself. *Still drowsy? However, these old sticklers might have thought, I’m glad they drew it out of you. Was it painful? I’m sure it was. But to be thankful to understand what pain and pray do better—I’ve learned to think that’s what true strength really is? So compared to the rotten souls that faced kindness out of fear with measure, aren’t us cowards fleeing from the stars far more dreadful?*

This new voice resonated so close, almost as if it came from the very her, though the things it said meant nothing they still twanged inside her heart.

*Traitor.*

Calmness or coldness. Respect or sorrow. *On the contrary this is exactly where I belong; at least part of me.* *Leave the choices to the young.*

*Is that your right to say?*

*And is it yours? To them we are merely voices. It is there choice what to follow.*

*Then we will whisper and we shall see.*

*As it should, though for the whole of us it’s better that she woke. I too…tire.*

It’s what she now knew she wanted too. But how?

*Can’t you hear it?*

What?

*He’s calling, always by your side, even as you sleep and your body is left begin to shave away to nothing. …But you’re still not done yet, are you?*

Not in the least.

*Then I think you know. All you need to do is perk your ears and listen.*

That’s right. If she could hear their voices then she should be able to find him as well, however far they separated.

*Right! There’s a limit to ignorance.*

*…eivyn!* Desperate whispers called out beyond the darkness.

*Just follow the voice.*

*Reivyn!* Her name. She would chase it down as long has she had breath.

*Then chase…*

Earthly whispers gained strength and the ethereal began to fade. Suddenly it was more than just darkness that penetrated beneath her eyes. She could feel her hands and feet as well as moisture on her skin.

“Reivyn!”

Unsealing heavy lids from stagnant sleep she saw his face, tearstained and muddied and distraught with worry.

*Why are you crying?* She didn’t know. She didn’t want to see it; reaching out. *Ah, this must be…sorrow*. A slightly different bitter feeling; more wet and felt than those she’d known before.

Suddenly she was lifted by the waist; wrapped by sturdy, trembling arms, warm and suffocating. Never let her slip away.

*And this must be relief.* So many things become clearer to her. She was amazed she hadn’t seen before.

“Huh…? Thanks.” Even Reivyn was surprised, nuzzling his hair with her hand. She had merely wanted to do for him what she had always done for her. “I’m so glad that you’re awake.” He said it so clearly. Hesitation no longer stained his voice.

“I am too.”

“I didn’t know what to do… You wouldn’t wake up. It didn’t matter what I said or did. Your fever wouldn’t let and I could feel you growing lighter over time. …Is it fine for you to speak?’

“Maybe just for you.”

And now there was relish. That dumbfounded look on his face… She almost loathed to think it would wear off.

“I’m alright now…thanks to you.” Even if it was a little painful, she had no intention of leaving his embrace soon.

--

Deader When Alive

She was awake. Rather she had been all the while, maybe even first. The pain wouldn’t have let her sleep even if she’d wanted.

It didn’t matter. Her mind was empty, blank; the voice that edged her on reduced to a simple bit of static by her ear.

…Feeding time again? She gripped her lips with a fragile tightness, too little to keep from pried apart. The sludge of water and grinded nutrients forced through her gritted teeth slowly soothed her throat.

Soothing voices, calming voices, cheering voices—hateful; none of their words even reached her ears.

Living didn’t mean you couldn’t be a corpse.

--

Twisted

They had been there for days. Was it one, two, or three? Hezran didn’t know. In any case it was growing harder to provide sustenance and from the limited grass and crunches to be found nearby.

With Reivyn now awake he’d been able to safely survey their surroundings for the time. If there was one thing that was made clear for time, it was that the walls were tall and the path was long. The same scenery continuing on in loop and seemingly forever.

Of course she’d told her about her dreams just as he’d shared his, strange that they’d occurred so close together. It felt like they’d been given pieces of puzzle, still too many holes to put together. If the voice she heard was the same and the one who set them on their journey, Hezran couldn’t help but the person took his dreams might have some relation. He made sure to properly thank Reivyn for her insights of course.

And he might have had to again. The distance still too far to tell, however, at least she sensed a similarity a ways walk from the ship. They would have left already had Everyn gotten up.

*You know she’s conscious, don’t you?*

He knew well, just as many times as Reivyn asked. What was he to do? It wasn’t his place to say, but from reaction he could imagine to understand a little of Everyn’s pain—the pain of a tool had been thrown away. No better than the coma of his past.

*You’re quite the hateful pair.*

*That’s right.* There was one thing he had in mind. By now Everyn should have regained some strength, at least enough to walk. What was left in need was a reason; no matter how twisted they may come.

*Idiot…* Reivyn headed to the edge of the cave, she didn’t need to be told much more. *I’ll be expecting sweets when we’re out free.* The pointed snag of white that peered from her mouth had always been quick for sugar.

*The best that money can buy,* wherever they might go to get it*.* Now for his job to earn the other’s keep. He put his mouth to whisper by Everyn’s ear, to leave no doubt that she wouldn’t hear. “Is that really all for fear?”

No response.

“You’re weaker than I thought. Does he really need to tell you at each step? Both of us still alive and well and you still sitting cold on rump. Pathetic. A free pass back and up; be sure to visit your maker once along the way. I can’t wait to see his face.”

Taunting enough to earn a quiver. Hezran hated himself just enough to nudge her with his foot before he turned away.

“I guess that’s all she was—couldn’t follow through—a broken, failed fool.”

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Arrival

“Are we sure this is the place.”

Two shadows stood amongst defrosting trees, a careful camouflage against the woods which hid behind them something bigger.

“They should be coming down the river any time now.”

It was fast-flowing; still chips of ice left over from the depths of winter. A skilled hand would be required to steer through the thawing debris.

Beyond the caving roots and twisted bend a cascade of water poured in torrent from the melting of the snow, the mountain cliff as steep as a knife’s edge. It was loud and constant, but sharper ears might have caught the briefest interruption as the two quivered expectant among the glistening needles, watching for the piece of carving that peeked just into sight and—

“Leader!” The thicker piece of wood jiggled with excitement, so much so as to nearly fall and slip beyond the edge. If it weren’t for the lighter hand to catch him from behind…still, it had been a long time and Jord wasn’t the only one emotional. Cull leaned so far over to help prop them up that he tipped out and passed the side. It would have ended up more than just a dip in water too, if he were alone.

Shivering in part from cold Cull paddled the last few meters to the goal and the second, older man tied to moor. Who was he? “You’re father?” Linde teased, she actually already knew but how she’d missed the feeling…

An expression somewhere between a grimace and a laugh, Cull lowered his head from side to side. “My father’s not that old.”

“Always with the fragrant words, this one; even though as of late their relationship has been just as good.” Cull tried to strike the old man back only to be easily pushed back. “Now let me tell you well ahead of time, if I see so much a thieving finger off the both of you, you’ll be less for it.”

“Don’t worry. The only thing you need to worry about us thieving is our little boss.”

“That’s fine then.”

“Fine then!? Maybe for you but I’ll have you know that I’ve still got a few things I need to do.”

“And what exactly can you do? You’re the one who left in the first place. How exactly did you expect things turn out?”

“I’ll just keep that bastard honest. I won’t let the same thing happen twice again.”

“Jealousy?” It looked like things had turned for the better once they’d left. Their former boss had always hoped that father and son would make up.

Cull paused a moment, tentative to hold out warmth. “…Looks like I’m going to have a younger sister.”

Was this a time for congratulations or one for condolences? Fortunately the decision wasn’t one that needed yet be made as the flapping of birds and warning songs echoed between the trees.

“Now we’ve brought the raft as asked; barely fit the channel.” Fontaine pointed behind towards the covered object and then back towards the boat, with a pair of extra wooden oars. “Though he insisted on being the one to see you in, but with this extra weight you’ll need to pull as well.”

“Right.”

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Beyond the Crevice

*Looks like she’s still following us.*

*Good.*

Few words had passed between the two as the fled from their pursuit, always leaving just a glimpse of shadow for Everyn to grab on. No doubt Reivyn was still angry for what he’d done, but more than that seem to take her mind at times.

*I’ve been meaning to ask you…about all these…* Hezran had checked from a while ago. They looked similar, and felt so to the touch, but he was not able to catch even a wisp of wilful feeling off their scents.

*You don’t need to worry about me. It does seem a bit sad though.* Reivyn leaned over to graze the split colors with finger. *Even as immortal as we might sometimes seem all it takes is a single crack. Even me, at the core. In some ways we might even be more fragile.*

*But what could have led them all to fall within this pit.* It can’t have been a natural occurrence, first in abundance, but also at surrounding nature. There was little water to chip away the sides, except for torrential rains came after. It could have been just the moving of the earth but in ways the crevice was much too neat and narrowed at the sides, much like a giant eye. But could a crater be dug so deep.

*I know about as little as you. There are some things the others refuse to tell, but if there is one thing that seeps through, it’s feeling. When I look into the stars, whatever else, there is always a sense of nostalgia hidden passed the layers.*

*Is that so.* Whether out of kindness or from fear, the feeling of being purposefully kept in dark was always something difficult—misunderstood or with the best intentions. *Whatever’s being hidden, we’ll find it out together.*

*I can trust you right?*

*No matter what.* It didn’t even need to be said…besides. *I noticed your wrist seems kind of bare. You didn’t lose anything in the fall did you?*

*Thanks.* Reivyn lifted the Ardent cores and a snapped thread from her pocket. *I guess it’s hardly surprising with everything that happened. It was already a tight fit after getting cut short to share.*

*Considering how it happened, I think she will forgive you.*

*I know… I know now that even fragile bonds are harder to cut short.* Was this about the voices or herself. With more emotions and understanding, there was worry; tangling at the feet and neck.

*If that’s the case all you need to do is make sure your happier bonds are stronger. Pile them up one by one until the fragile strings become an axe, strong enough to break any malevolent chain that aims to bind you. And of course I’ll be right at the blade…or maybe the handle would be better—whichever you prefer.*

*Ha ha…*

Reivyn smiled at that. That was good. Their pace quickened as well and as Reivyn ran her fingers along the wall it seemed she found the spot.

*Stand back would you.* Reivyn place both palms flat and closed her eyes as she felt around. A small light seemed to pour out before the rock turned translucent revealing a cordoned corridor, both invisible and unreachable to the naked mind. As obvious from the height of its depths, the crude stone stairway seemed to inch on forever beyond their sights. *Still, I have no idea where this could lead…* But there was nowhere else and even with her powers they wouldn’t last a straight on climb.

*That’s the funny thing about life—you never know where it will lead.* Maybe latter on he’d find the sullen hole was best…still, staying down wasn’t really something that suited him and not knowing hurt him more than the act of failure. Even if he had to push himself Hezran wouldn’t hesitate in taking that first step to propel himself on to further and after.

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To Cleanse a Soul

Shivering whistles echoed between the stones. It was a pity they didn’t have recorders down below, a bit sound would have been nice to keep the tedium at bay. Still, she couldn’t complain—so many scrapes with death and close to lost a leg. Now the rhythmic brushing and washing seemed almost cleansing to her soul. …They were the only things that kept her thoughts at bay at times.

It still felt like yesterday that she’d heard her grandfather’s death for sure; she could still hear his voice clearly in her mind. She knew he wouldn’t blame her, but that didn’t mean she didn’t blame herself. *If only I hadn’t been so eager…* It wasn’t just the soaked cloth in her hands that dampened the walls and floor.

The thought of heading back hardy crossed her mind. There was nothing left for her. Even here she kept hidden to herself, three warm meals and shelter in the rain. Besides few words, only the silence kept her company; humming herself away.

*Creak…* It was a strange sound to be heard amongst these solids. The first thought was of weary bones, but…*no pain.* Where exactly was it coming from?

The walls seemed still as the table in the center, while a vibration so small as to be deemed imaginary slipped beneath her feet. Even so far in, it was too weak to be one of those experiments let loose to seek revenge.

Just when she thought she’d be back in calm Elis heard the flutter of falling paper and their bindings as the dumping bookshelf tilted precariously behind. Even without aptitude she had still trained to be a soldier, enough for old age habit to kick in—a good thing too. Without those time honed reflexes she would have easily been crushed, and then trampled beneath the feet that followed

“Are you alright?” The face behind the hand that reached to help her up seemed genuinely pale. “It’s never good to have the same type of lock two ways in; if only the previous owners had remembered to leave a map. Still, I think we are going to need your help. It’d be best that we contain this before any victims get involved.”

“You can’t show up here!”

“That’s a pity, because there’s no longer time to spare.”

--

Dumping the Dragon

“This should be alright.” They’d finally managed to lug it all inside, all after emptying a larder full of cures for the space. It was a clean bit of work.

“Question remains of whether they’ll be anything to do with it. It just looks like a pile of scrap to me.” Jord still had a hard time believing that this would be their key unto the future.

“It’s more than that you lunkhead. Look between the slates of hull and there’s wiring and monitors—definitely bigger than anything I’ve worked before.” Enough to fiddle for a lifetime; just the thought of the working product got Cull salivating at the gums. “But it’s all been stripped down. I wouldn’t be able to tell head from ass as is.” Cull shot a glance to his two compatriots but they just shook their heads.

“Us neither. We never even got to see the ‘prints and, well, you know how is when you try to take apart his work.”

“Hopeless.”

“Still, you shouldn’t worry boss.” It was never a good sign when the flittering of a hardly suffocated smile ran across Linde’s face. “I mean if anything your worries will be coming soon enough to you.”

Cull groaned. There was only one thing that could mean. “It must have been excruciating, a man such as himself letting such magnificence slip out of sight an in such state if only for a second.” A momentary flash of inspiration. “I wonder how he’d feel if we managed to stick it back together before he arrived.”

“Stop it! You’re just the same as him when it comes to your machines. Besides there isn’t all that much scrap to spare for experiments.” Hit him right in the heart she did. Linde knew them both all far too well.

“I know. Still I wonder if that means he got the letter.”

This time they both shrugged. “Neither of us heard before we left. Seems they had a tag on him and time was nearly up.”

“I always thought he was suspicious—“

“Isn’t that just your father complex acting up?”

“You know why do you always have to bring things up? Seriously, only the fatass… That’s probably why they always end up leaving you.”

“Ho! I dare you say again…”

A crash came from above, enough to stop the bickering besides Jord’s munching noise. “Why don’t we all go check?”

“What…”

“But…”

“Now, come on, come on.” He wouldn’t take no for an answer. By the width of his girth he took the two in arm and pushed them out the door.

“You’ve always been strangely assertive at times like these.”

--

Running

What was it about his words that made her chase him? Had made her come straight into their arms, her teeth grating ivory to dust between pursed lips.

She’d been provoked, she knew it—she wasn’t all that dumb. She should have been fine to let it rot. Honestly, at the time their might have even been a sunken spot of happiness in her mind.

Seeing that knowing smirk…it just made her want to burst. So much so that the cracklings came despite herself. This cursed body. This cursed life.

“I figured you’d have something like this up your sleeve. Won’t you stop? I’d rather not have to carry a hollowed carcass to the grave; especially not yours.” There it was again: The all-knowing, still caring. It made her hair stand on end even more than the single charge run through the air.

“You must have realized by now, I’m not you’re real sister!” Why did she speak? *Tool.*

“What, just because we had a mild fight and grew back a few limbs? Didn’t you hear? We’re all the same in those regards? If anything it makes us closer.” Those were not the eyes of a liar, nor one consumed by his beliefs. “If you think that makes you any lesser in my eyes…you are sorely mistaken.”

Cruel! Why did he have to be so cruel? It was all supposed to be just an act. It…had to be an act.

It was best that she forget. She didn’t need to think just act.

“Stop!” *Her?* Why was she there? “I don’t want you to do this. They don’t want you to do this! Isn’t that enough?” Maybe it was, at least for a primal conduct override.

“Hey…!” Who was it? More noises. She was just so tired.

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Walking Straight

“She isn’t waking up. We had the girl look after her since they seemed so close.”

“Thanks for that.” Hezran hadn’t been sure what would happen until Kale had come in. There were still remnant sparks, the volatility of their own intruding presences doing little but to fan the flames. A cold, unfettered room interpreted as cell, but still it was more warmth than could be offered.

“Are you sure that it’s okay for you to be out here?” Shocked as the others; it was kind of him to ask.

…Hezran knew better than anyone. “It’s probably safer.” And still he’d wished to stay by her side. That’s why he was so thankful to have an opportune distraction so close at hand. “The supply route seems to be working safe and well.”

“Yes…thanks to you.” It was something of a secret; a touch dangerous at that. While consulted of the risks, they’d had no idea whether Joe would pull through, especially given last of parting words. The secure tether had provided luxuries of calm and medicines to stave off ancient bottles of disease and now a letter left for Hezran in return for that he had sent just before they’d took to sky—along with something smelt afoul.

No it wasn’t just the tinge of the paper; yellow, off-white and at its points a bit fuming. Even the scribbles of handwritten word were far off of the methodical lining of the doctor’s touch, and at the same time clobbered of familiar.

“Are you going?”

Hezran only put up one finger of resistance, limply with a sigh. There was no need to ask. As obvious of a conclusion as it might lead he would keep walking, facing forward through whatever slicing winds.

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Identity

“It’s okay to wake up now. You don’t need to pretend to be asleep.”

Just as said, the silent eyes that had lied to rest stared dully back.

“You’ve never been able to sleep, not as long as I’ve remembered. Though I imagine now that’s not what’s keeping you awake.” She was pretty far gone, Elis had heard a little bit about what had happened. Some secrets were best left for them alone to say. “Say, how’s he been doing? My father I mean.”

The girl made a grimace; it was something.

“I imagine that means he’s fine as ever. I’ve heard and seen what things what he’s done; what things he’s made you do. It’s made me hate him times. I can’t imagine a man like him sending his daughter away of kindness—the old man’s gone you heard. I guess we’re just a family of manipulators…I’d liked the role I’d played way more than others.”

Seated sidelong, Elis tilted her head to brush the resting girl’s hair.

“How’d it feel taking up a role that wasn’t yours; knowing of your lying as well as what you hid. If experience would tell: Sometimes you lose track of where you’d left the mask only to find it merged within your very skin, a bloody scab too painfully ripped off. It’s a hard enough thing provided the anchored guidance of feeling memory, I can only imagine so much without. The fakes become more treasured in the face of none—harder to break away. And with him saying that… Say how do you take his kindness? How do you think he thinks it is?”

The girl turned as if escape, but Elis wouldn’t let her.

“No matter, I’ve nursed this wound for far too long. I’ll let you make a choice; if it’s for you I wouldn’t mind to give a grudge. So, who are you?”

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Silver and Black

*Burnt to the ground…*

It was an apt expression; one that Hezran wasn’t inclined to disagree. Caught within the crumbled cape the damage had seemed less, covered from mind’s eye. Whatever the case their actions certainly hadn’t helped to stem the fire and now they only brought more flames to burn. *It’s…rather sad.*

Within the countless charcoaled cracks new strands of greening flora had begun to take their root, dried and set aflame by the spreading wall of fire that evaporated through the shimmering pools that served their feeding puddles. Spare droplets flicked up into the air clung to the silent stretches of silvered wire so slight as to have been previously hidden from the naked eye. That small refraction of light had let them slip from capture, but too late had they realized by the center well that their surroundings were already charged with fiery life.

It had crossed their minds and seemed more likely, but somehow they had escaped their noticed, countless knights of shimmered armor charging like an army of ghosts of vengeance. They clung to their blades as well as the fires clung to them, burns a shallow pain in light of feeling, and at their center a larger, hulking mass whose silver beamed unsoiled as even the elements did not dare but to part its way.

Wind stifled to silence. Earth crumbled to dust. Water turned to rain. Even the most physical blunt and sharpness refused to take its form; all left to a single shortened blade to fend the towering sword.

*Hezran!!*

The weight was unbearable, a true showing of a pen in battle with a sword. The descending blade may have been as clumsy as was old, but its solid strokes held all the finesse of an artist hand. It was all Hezran could do to hold up with his heels tearing back against the ground.

“Don’t come!” Even out of the corner of his eyes he could see her charge. What could she do with her only weapon sealed? “You’re doing well enough just there.” He had to wonder if it was whim or not, so far the single duel been allowed—a display of crushing strength on mercy’s wings and a grace that Hezran adamantly refused accept.

He would just have to push harder. He would move like water to slip between the bones of death. *Harder!* He would cleave like stone to smash through deaths gaze; grasp the instant where a gap appeared to kick against the wall return; find the gaps between the plates to sever bonds.

…But of course it wouldn’t be that easy. The spurts of blood that gushed out beneath the helm stemmed far too quickly, an armored and living monster covered head to toe with steel skin. “If that’s true, even more so, I can’t let you keep what you have swallowed.”

No answer came from those hollowed eyes, but the raising arms seemed to beckon from on high.

*Take them!* The wind was a thief, but was it far enough to stay free. Countless weapons both pointed and blunt gathered like a stream of stars beneath the shades of smoke, slipping into the eternal void.

Maybe just to Hezran, at that very moment, the striking sword seemed unnaturally slow, as if carried by a vine-trapped golem’s legs. Still fast enough that that moment seemed far too small, so much that the cannon swinging back to head was doomed misfire.

So why then did the burst of force shout out unperturbed?

*Why?* Those strong and steady shoulders; that hefty mass of steel, they soared like a bird made wings through fire and rubble, earth and wood—all until the force remained no more. The route was circled, hollowed; but less so than the gouging sight that lay trapped within. “Why didn’t you stop it?”

Torso caved in, cut and slashed for impact—it was more of a surprise than anything that those eyes retained any light at all; that those breathless lungs could still breathe any words at all. “You should know the name I gave was more than just for show. Her and her extension… I’m sure you know just as well, dead of life, relinquished just a part of her no less…

“Like the blackest moon eclipsing suns’ rays to never shine again you’ll shroud the world dark—worlds; future, past, and present. Endless miasmic clouds reflections; evers’ darkest secrets brought out to fore. Disaster…more worse than any ever known. Disaster lost to time, and space, and path.

“I didn’t fight… I chose not to fight; instead turning to the scratching hairs of doom placed nearest in blade’s reach. I was sure you’d bring disaster…I still believe. I can see the shadow draping over, spread to cover.” The greying silver knight clutched Hezran’s arm with the last of fleeting strength. “It will erode you; destroy those last remaining remnants of leaking spirit. And in the end those wisps still proved stronger than my own.”

The rusting silver hand slipped off—feeble, cold. “It’s all I’ll ever ask… Prove me wrong… Show them all—show them your shade of black is lighter…and worth of having hope…” A final fading stillness, never to wake nor clutch nor hold—never again.

Hezran could only cry for the dead old merchant and this long dead other self, his muddy tears soaking into the shattered crystals shards of white somehow still retained of glow, clutched harder, warmer between his fingered palms. “I’ll pray I’ll hold to it. I’ll strive to protect it, ever holding on this sludge even if one day it dyes me pitch—but that day will not be today; it won’t be tomorrow or the day after. Always I’ll keep that shade of black to grey.”

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Stains

“Mobilizing such a large force…is it really necessary?”

“There’s little choice. Apparently they’ve taken it upon themselves to lay the blame on us. More than that, they’ve become impatient. It seems that man had intended to keep the secret until his grave.” That said the freshly minted mask galloping up besides the carriage was no better. “Your silence tells me you might’ve been inclined to do the same?”

“Even more so now.”

“But the choice is far from yours to make.” They were family now, both bound by the same types of chains. She took small relish in the reciprocal suffocation of will. After all look what happened to those who dared expression. And with the other perhaps she should have done the same. “She never did come back…”

“You took good care of her; I doubt she’d do anything other than that she’d think of you. I’m sure she’d felt affinity, even back then it’d been hard to quiet her defense. To some degree we were all the same.”

“And so easy to betray. Even now I’m sure you’re thinking some way to express it.”

“Even the most obedient dog will have its whims.”

“Then there’s always the muzzle and the leash. When the needle is too thin to keep it down there is always drilling to the brain.”

“Then the treasure would be damaged and the owner left to silent loneliness. Allowing some rebellion lightens up the days.” Not unlike the dullness that would fade and come as that person left and came. ”I wonder, how is it that you really think?”

“However I really think. Whether it’s up to me or me alone…”

“In the end actions are that much less than thought.” He had only words, his line had reached an end.

She didn’t want to hear it; feared that her haughty queen-masked princess would be reduced to her fragile self. “The fresh recruits? I see you still haven’t shown them your face.”

Of course not. It was still too early for him. No longer could he be their friend of purpose, no matter how he willingly took their stride. “Still green behind the ears. If it were up to me I’d have left them all behind. They’re far too young for this kind of business.”

“Young or not they have their rights to wish. Only cruel wisdom dares deny of feelings.”

When had his hair begun to look so grey? Still…“As much as feelings are important, satiating them oft just leaves a hole; vengeance one so large and gaping as only those lost could hope to fill.” And for that he was thankful. Skeletal messages passed along had saved some lives.

“Lectures once again? I’d preferred if yours types’ stains didn’t spread on my belongings.”

It was that very iciness that had him worried. For one of childish cruelty she’d turned too strangely lucid. Even in his short recollections sight he’d never seen her palms so red as now.

“Our only wish to stay the claws of blood. That sort of work should be left to the inanimate, and better not at all.”

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Roots

“Hand me the wrench would you.”

“Here.” Elis pulled something out from the laden box of tools sat bundled by her knees from where she watched Darren ply his work. “But you really do go about it such an old fashioned way.”

“I can only make do with what’s available.”

“Still, I’m sure even our forefathers had better methods. Those extra bolts seem a bit too unwieldy.”

“Not much we can do about that…need more material if we’re ever going to truly understand how the manufacturing took place—even more than what’s that mass floating in the sky. They say if you ever want to find any truly hidden treasure you’ve got to dig beneath. Unfortunately I’ve have had my hands far too tied up to add archaeologist to my vocations.”

“Well then I guess you better hope you have the time and lungs to conduct your search well after we’ve competed.” Competed was a light word, but in essence it’s what it was—what all wars were. A competition between conflicting ideologies, views, needs, or even simply desires. There might have been better ways of going about things and whatever came out there was usually lesser for it, at least than what may have been, but Elis couldn’t help but wonder if she had a choice by choosing little sides, only nudging friendship to decision. “It’s not really any of my business; but do you think it’ll hold.”

“Well enough. I’ve left the outer plates as much intact and the more roughshod work to the inner consoles with the lesser risk of impact. Appearances are necessary of course, though pray its riders don’t rip a cord by accident.”

“It’s not good to lie you know.”

“I prefer the term exaggeration. And with the right amount of effort we could turn even that into a sure reality,” at least that was what Darren believed—had been shown to believe by the impossibilities he had come to know and face so long ago and seemingly ever since again. “But it’s one thing for you to say when in any case you’re not all that different. Not any of your business? No, that’d be the last thing. This might more your business than most anyone else. Even said, I’d always wondered; to be honest I’d never expected you to come.”

“So not even you hold all the clues!”

“Nothing lest if anything more of questions. The more the holes were filled the more I realized that I was only looking at a mere patch of ground and that the canyons that spread beyond my knowledge were that much larger than the ones I saw were deep beyond my sight. Still, I have trust and I have hope. That’s more than most could say.”

“Trust and hope you say…” Would it be enough? That said…”It’s gotten awfully noisy on outside.” And it wasn’t just festivities either, though for a time after the medicine man arrived it had seemed as if that was all that was going to be; the Ardent knew his magic serums had saved many within this unearthed capsule filled of ancient and unknowns exposed from a distant past, perhaps not so far at hand.

“You’re right, it is about time. Here, you can finish the rest I trust?” He’d already seen her hands at work. She knew more than most engineers he’d known, though given the slight relics of the ancients past he had had the fortune to read it was small wonder they’d managed to consider themselves of any competence at all leaving Darren to imagine what other kinds of techniques and structures the others had to offer.

“As much as you…” Even if her face was curved Elis’s hand twitched at the touch of steel, a thirst born from an ingrained seed of slight rebellion pertained from youth.

“If you were ever on the fence, now’s the time to make you’re peace.” Exiting the burrow Darren was released into the light again. “It never ceases to amaze.” Not just the road or the people met along it, but the carvings that motioned to long lost pasts that now he could only catch glimpses of. There was no sun and but still the rays of light came down brightly warm his face. If he wasn’t so busy he wouldn’t have been finished just simply taking samples of those crystal chandeliers reflecting from the ceiling high above. “But I’d better deal with this commotion before it gets out of hand.”

It was up just a few levels from the forested surface ground, the grains of fresh carved railings feeling comfortable to the sliding touch, only to be interrupted by the grating shouts that followed.

“You should leave, now!”

“Telling us to move again after shooing us away from our last home. I’d hope you understand.” It was the kindest hint Fontaine was going to give. The duo had already shown up in a place left half-inviting, one part view as callous saviors and the other as the cynical harbingers’ of unwanted doom. Truth told Fontaine was as much in on it too, their slipping and goings out, but with wounds enough and time to fester rumors had taken on a whole new dark light. The crowd was already such a mix of faces, hardly any of them bright. For now their jeers still yet remained as words.

“But—“

“Now, now, I think that’s enough for today.” Hezran nearly jumped out of his skin when Darren clapped his shoulder from behind. “Trust me there’s no need to hurry. Just calm down and think things through.”

*Doctor…* Relief seemed to spread much like a wave through the gathered cloud. All of sudden everything was made well. It was amazing how different a sense they had come to garner when effectively they had meant the same.

“I’ll be taking these two with me now. I hope nobody minds.”

“But of course. That would be a huge help, thanks.” At least it seemed no one else rejected the notion enough to care. They knew in their heads and their hearts preferred it hidden, so that when the party slipped off to the side audible gasps of breath could be heard behind.

“I’d thought the worst.”

“To think you would have thought that I would be caught so easily. I feel a bit insulted. A mutual friend relayed the warning.” It was more complicated than that, but that was all that was needed. “So, how is he?”

Reivyn handed over a palm of shards. That was all that remained.

“It’d be better if you kept them. Reivyn didn’t want to touch them; even less so to have me. Something about a lack of compatibility.” For something of similar nature the Silver Knight had been something of an antigen, poisonous to them, but in the right hands a powerful defense.

“Thanks. Looks like it finished more cleanly than we could have hoped. I’m sure he spared no effort going in—that man always was prepared.” Darren had a plan for these. An ancient relic or something of a myth, but a friend’s inked words had granted conviction, just as they had so many other times. It wasn’t his main trade, but well he supposed his dabbling would have to be well enough. “The tears will have to wait. I’m sure you’ve guessed as well, otherwise you wouldn’t have been making such a racket. You’re not wrong—as much as you know that there is nowhere else to run. All that is left is to make our preparations and for that the others should be back with any minute.”

“It sounds like you’ve got a lot going on already, though I wouldn’t have guessed from how quiet it was.”

“Of course, things were kept a secret. If the people learned of thieves within their midst they’d become far too frightened. Only when greater threat attempts their lives will there be room for boarding. Until then they’ll be acting outriders. There are no better secret scouts than those who won’t be noticed to be missed.”

“And these thieves…?”

“That’s the right of it. Anise was in charge in back the day. The youngster never really took a liking to me, but I suppose he felt responsible; neither were the other’s all too pleased at time. But it’s been years now and old wounds have mostly healed.”

“That explains a lot and also little. …It’s a bit of topic but you seem a lot less jittery even without her presence.”

“Sometimes we act to fool others; sometimes we act to fool ourselves. For me it’s a bit of both. Worries go out the window when you are down against the wire.”

“And you’ve also got an idea as to how to get things under control? You seem as much an orchestrator of the current events as anyone.”

“Not orchestrator so much as narrator. Just playing my role I had no proof of things come to pass, however, I understand your apprehension. For now in exchange why won’t you take my well wishes and a gift—it’s about time you had it.” Darren rummaged within satchel he carried strapped around his waist, a precarious jumble, and amidst all the bottled liquids and tinctured salves a single bounded spine rose to the top. It was a book covered in rough brown leather that seemed as if it had weathered many of a sanded and watered storm; dog-eared corners marked its age.

Hezran grasped it in his palm and spun its pages through to end, or he would have if there were all that many pages to begin with. Countless jagged triangles of torn off parchment rendered the reading limp and hollow and what little reading remained conveyed nothing but empty space except for the few smudged words forefront facing and at the same time… “There’s too much.”

“Oh, I’m sure and I wouldn’t claim it to be wrong from what I’ve seen. Still, just as much as you shouldn’t forget the forest for the trees, the same can be said reversed. All it takes is one strand of infected lumber to spread amongst its fellows and one sample short in order to fail to construct a cure. For now I suggest you rest up. Not all good intentions always lie at odds with bad. Even as a villain you could remain our only hope.”

“And what will you do?”

“I’m full hands preparing the doomsday steed.”

“Will it be ready?”

“We can’t afford to cut too many corners, a bad enough job will send you tumbling from the sky. Not to worry though, I’ve gone through the process once before, besides some minor tweaks to cheat our chances, but if we find ourselves devoid of hope—” Alarm bells echoed out beyond the cliffs. An emergency meeting was being signalled. “I trust you can make some.”

In the mere moment they’d looked away Darren had already traversed the stairs to bottom. This could be the last chance. And there might have been no answer, as far as anybody knew just another relic dug up from adventure. “Who wrote this?”

“Like so many other things we’ve seen today—your father.”

--

Like Smoke

“Where are you going?”

He had been caught at the exit, and just when he’d thought the children’s vengeful rage had gave to sleep. The voice came from ahead, in the shadows of the trees, but he still worried it might wake the others. “Out for a breath.”

“Then there’s really no need to go so far.”

“Geez, you have no tact. Even us soldiers need to let out behind the bushes every once in a while. This tin can is long overdue a leak.”

“Strange considering your heavy arms.”

“Not so strange if you consider the dangers of the forest.”

“But then all you need to do is give them a little zap. Aren’t you the ultimate pest repellent as you are now?”

It was a foolish conversation, one that went round and round with no hope of either end without the other breaking first. In the end it was him that heaved the sigh. “So, what is it you want?”

“Nothing much—and believe me I wouldn’t want to cause you trouble—but I’d rather you not make things too easy on your end. Just one would be far too small a trouble, especially when that one might even change its coat.” The air quivered, but sparks refused to fly, or maybe vanished ere they started. “Dead set on blasting through? That’s not a problem. I just ask that you take the garbage to the dump, and leave a marking when you come. Here, see?”

The darkness seemed to beckon and from its depths surfaced more shadows without a light. These knights…they seemed hollow. Instead of even breaths a gaseous murk leaked from their helms. There were eyes—at least he thought there were, for they were so dark they melded with the lifting emptiness beneath.

“Who exactly are you?”

“Nuh-uh-uh, it’s a secret. You may not know me and what you don’t know you may soon forget, but I know you. I know you very well.”

The presence vanished, leaving behind chronic whispers and a dulling headache. Sure enough, in seconds he knew naught; his eerie guard still in its pace seemed awkwardly less so out of place. A finger to the head. Had a finger sunk to head, scooped something from its depths? No matter, but to march.

--

Jolt of Life

An explosion could be heard from the front, lines of white and blue searing through both rock and bone. They were caught off-guard and even some of those who fled in panic were flung before their feet could touch the ground. If it weren’t for the stone coffins risen up behind them, even that would have been too little.

Among those jittered Hezran caught sight of familiar young with dress less sparked than others, a strange bit saving grace in light of lightning’s funnel. Still Cull’s teeth chattered as he spoke. “Came out of nowhere…alone at least.” They hadn’t seen the signs until it were too late, when the intruders had snuck past the eying lines and their vapors had already turned to things like magic.

“I’ll move you back.” It was obvious to see; though the growing man’s life was hardly endangered, those raucous burns would leave him bedded before his feet, but…

The blast was too much. All for Reivyn’s hardening, crunching, and arranging; subject to merciless blows over and again the earthen minerals proved far too fragile to conduct.

Of the five armored knights just one remained pristine; the others with dented armor muddied even before the rain, with human shapes that could hardly be contained. Their smoke spread like poison, thinning as it swamped both air and mind. As it entered Hezran’s nostrils it made him dizzy, though the other’s faired far worse as their battered bodies rose again, this time to daggered points, their skin slowly taking on a darker shade. The light left, their fingers vanished; before long they would be just that—nothing but a spreading plague.

Spears of earth jutted partial from the ground. *You need to hurry.* Even Reivyn felt some attachment, though first for him she would less than want to see the others end and so she halted. She’d wait just as long as there was still flesh to once return—flesh for her to kill.

Beneath Hezran’s roiled sight the chains of smoke fell spread upon the ground, wobbling and floating as they connected to a single strand that led to the very center of the pestilence where he found… “Lodis!” But for all his screaming the muffling aura seemed to quiet him. Looking closer, though the body was still whole, Lodis’s eyes spun in dizzying swirls. There was still something at their core, sinking, steadily, among something else that showed no mercy, or even feeling, as it raised its arm.

That’s when Hezran noticed a separate pulse. Buried beneath the skin shallow just above, flickering between light and dark. *Just the same as the old man, but something’s different.* Feelings told him if this were to turn to wraith a truly terrible thing would come unfold—but there was no time to contemplate, another thunderous bolt already running down the spine.

*Ugh…* Hezran’s limbs dragged like leaden pipes; each wall put up only served to barely slow the spreading chains of blue…it wasn’t enough. A familiar sear of flesh ran through his shoulder, like some phantom memory of which he would soon become within this gas compressed in globe leaving nowhere left to run.

His thoughts were already almost gone, no words could be exchanged between two opposed natures caked in grime. Hezran’s legs would carry him forward through the shattered walls and narrowing corridors of ethereal flesh, his own shields of black only serving as delay to the infinite, vacuous fog of dark and the shine of his own pointed dagger serving the lightning rod to guide his fate.

Tumbling forward something cracked and something trembled. While the rest were brought back to whole, there were some pieces that would never piece together once again.

The beams of the artificial sun pierced through the veil and besides the many pale faces and hollow strips of emptied armor there was the drip of blood, red amidst shards of vibrant blue sparking their last sparks—and a smile. “From the very start it seems I was doomed to be used. I suppose at least I got to see a pretty face before the end.”

“I’d think even better if you knew when to hold your tongue.” Before Hezran had known it Reviyn was already knelt beside them. Her finger went to her comrade crystal’s shards, but a stray spark pushed her back leaving a solemn sadness to her eyes. And with that note she pulled Hezran back as well.

“Thanks.”

Hezran thought it made him a bit sad at the end, that he was the only one who only saw skin deep, but sometimes strong bonds formed in instants and secrets were kept even between the closest beings. And with a final flash of life that pierced until the skies, the brief shaft of life gave way to nature’s tombstone grave over the path of nightmares near return.

*…It’s only too bad she isn’t here.*

*--*

Knight Mocking

*A dream again…* Was it a continuation of the last? Some sort of message passed along by who knows who for who knows what. At least a little better than the usual nightmares that haunted him.

So many questions. A magical guide? Some sort of text or voice for explanation? Well, at least he could still wish. It would also have helped if the glove that fit just a touch better.

This time it was some ancient castle built of stone. There was a flamboyant gathering, blue-gold braziers, wine-red carpet and all the trimmings. Dainty white-laced gloves parting beneath faceless faces; he could only feel unease, maybe even disgust, but it was the blinding sheen of the golden throne that hurt his eyes the most.

He tried to raise his head but in moments his knees slammed right to ground. This wasn’t his body, nor was it his home. He was powerless in the face of gravity’s pull.

The ornamental crown—its gums flapped incessantly, unbearably. The hall glowed with ecstasy…so why did he only feel cold?

From the side a jewelled blade. Would it cut? It seemed more than sharp enough. Thankfully it brought not a burnt but cooled touch, as icy as the marble steps that his forehead touched. An oath, a binding; the tightening of his chest. Its weight immeasurable; enough to sink his knees right through the sanding stones.

*Stop.* The acid was too strong. Even in waking that feeling of putrid vomit never left from front of throat.

--

What Coldness? For What Warmth?

“You came after all.”

“As if you hadn’t heard.”

“No I heard it well enough, though until the footsteps rang for true… Even a single piece missing can throw the entire puzzle into disarray. A picture not cut from a whole but built steadily, hand by hand, until it makes a future whole. Not a perfect picture, and clumsy cut around the edges, still, it’s something we all made together. And so what would you choose to add?”

From behind Everyn in the burrowing tunnel more silent than the raging fires that had begun to blaze outside a pair of piercing eyes gleamed silent, coldly, like those she used to feel—those that were easily reflected in her own.

“You’ve been given a loathsome duty. But that’s not all there is.”

It wasn’t just coldness anymore, but not exactly warmth. Both care and iron. And though steely wings they were, they’d fly but well enough… “Yet still it won’t be. If there is one thing that man did acknowledge it was that one danger posed below was something frightening, enough to erase all life, if it wasn’t for the erasing mind. I don’t suppose you’ve already got a piece left for that?”

“Not me, but yes. In fact she already came and left.”

“She? But the father’s already dead?”

“Dead not gone. Souls with strong attachment left behind for new blood meant to wield.”

--

Sea of Grey

*Father…* What did it mean? Still brooding.

Hezran hardly remembered his father—couldn’t even see his face, though that wasn’t much to say as even his mother’s fading voice slowly vanished from his mind.

As far as he knew they weren’t any special of a family, common as the dirt beneath his feet. He remembered being happy, but it was a simple happiness; nothing that would bring out unwanted jealousy, at least not that which would discriminate. He had been happy, all until that day that man had jumped into the fire. He should have been well and dead and if he wasn’t then no spare grace would save him from Hezran’s wrath.

In the first place when would he have had time to set this up? Where would he have gotten the power to guide the so many infinite of streams along these paths? Perhaps these were just ghost murmurs from the past, a hopeful whisper that just happened to reach the right point among countless alternative futures to make some sense. One could hardly imagine the work of one alone, but either way the pace struck chillingly enough to seem come from an undead spirit extending his hands from beyond the grave—as if it weren’t enough with the cold tendrils of air that wisped around his ankles looking down from the very lowest of pinnacles of the sky.

*There sure are a lot of them.*

If his own thoughts weren’t so cluttered they would have mirrored hers. From where they bundled close together on the mountaintop the humble surface hardly seemed like the oceanic span of green recovering from sparing winter’s frost, so grey as it was. Worse yet the sea would move, marching ever closer with sharpness glimmering from the sun. It was likely just the play of imagination that made it seem the crowd of blades descended like the swiftest soulless executioner’s heavy blade, the only hope that such a blade would crack by weight of stone.

The earth beneath Hezan’s feet gave a telling rumble, disconcerting even when he knew its cause and aim. “Is it ready?”

“Gathered to a froth.” All that was left was to strike the match and Hezran knew the perfect hammer. “I doubt there’s enough loose stone left up top now though.”

The mountain had already emptied once and with the hollow below it was already hanging by bare skin as is.

“Thankfully our old friend the mountain mole spat plenty enough up from ground. I almost feel reluctant.”

There was probably no need to put it into words, something about the noise making the need to be heard feel all the stronger; even as it would probably be easier on the otherwise. But with the starting crash of the tumbling cascade of nature there was little doubt that nothing left would pierce the veil. It was a blunt instrument, crude and cruel and crushing, but the best to form a heartless wall against advance; one that had left his partner out of breath through effort searching of the fatal cracks.

It was probably naïve to have hoped that the simple spark would have sent them scattered back, glad to see them halt their march a meter, and worried to see a figure come to front, eating away at the stone pebbles gathered in hope. It seemed the very air would gobble its way towards them leaving nothing—not even dust—without a belch to keep them sate.

Translucent woodwork bound by the wiring of friendship glowing with the will of desire combed through Reivyn’s hair, still strongly. They had the hopes of the townspeople, the hopes of the vagrants; their own hopes most of all. And so they fluttered down to where without it.

*Remember that even in this chaos, something yet can be constructed...*

--

The Sword and the Stone

“What’s with the commotion?” Kale was black under the eyes, tired of sleepless nights of crying and moving around to keep the peace while his dearest wife took to drafting orders as she cared for their youngest born sucking healthily at the teat.

*A grave for a traitor, why should we even bother? A mountain of rocks is good enough, too good.*

*Are you people blind!? There was more than just that…something at work. And in the end isn’t a mountain of rock and a few scars a small price to pay… You just don’t know how it felt.*

“Hey, hey, it’s not the time nor the place—please keep the animal from pissing all-over, the situation stinks enough with it and even you know least sacred rights. …Dammit where’s sanity when you most need it; whether fork or triangle, do those silvered hairs mean nothing. And you—“ Most had the sense to scatter at the rough, unfettered hand of lacking sleep except a stoic silence that move steady beneath its grizzly muzzle bringing quiet as it came; stopping even him.

Familiar and shortly known, but more appropriate than any other; more mysterious in placing. Elsenlied grasped both the air and the place in kneeling, giving her final rites to a man she’d killed herself, her face more tussled, her hair more weathered than either last they’d met. White carved words on the groundless tomb as a blade of new, and old, scratched out the words, those that were left behind as cold toes of steel dug the ground to propel the future that spoke new truth of the heart amidst the remains of foggy haze. A single claw came and went like memory, but it had surely left its mark.

--

Snake Eyes

It had happened all too quickly. Hezran was reduced to knee, slowly shaved away in spiteful play as Reivyn convulsed violently in the soil inched behind him.

It hadn’t mattered what they’d thrown, solid or otherwise. Everything vanished as if thin air. It was a power far too much for any frame no matter slight, invisible to the eye but surely there. Like a massive snake coiled around its master it swallowed everything, even the dirt and the ground beneath the wielder’s feet. With each thrashing it whipped out to scoop some more, leaving trailing tunnels and bursting vacuums in its wake; the only traces to show its passing. No matter how much it ate it never sated, its stomach an endless empty pit. Fruit wasn’t enough. Fear wasn’t enough. Tears weren’t enough.

Finally it grasped for blood and flesh.

Hezran raised his arm to take the bite, either by the piece or once in whole, but the tremor that came shocked the bloody, bloodless princess just as much as him. With her snake reeled even for a moment the reins were coiled back leaving Hezran a time to see the cause of his momentary respite, that slight and silvered blade he’d raised to arm but kept behind for fear of losing. Its blade had not dulled an inch.

“Something like that…” The whispered words seemed sparked so angrily. This time it wasn’t just one strand but several flailing tails that pushed him back, that chipped away beyond his flesh.

And then he’d done the worst. A desperate measure, he had opened the portal to black, still unknowing where it led, swallowing full the head. It was in that moment that Reivyn dropped to ground. She held her stomach as if some worm had crawled inside to eat its way. She didn’t even make a sound.

Try as he might to close the gap the snake kept it forced open as licked and scraped away the innards lay within. A paler face grew paler and his own matched to shade. Even as the head made glutton the neck came for him as well. It scrapped away his flesh, burned his brimming eyes. What was left? Not much. Certainly not enough. …At least from him.

“Wake up fool!” A line of light carved through the emptiness, severing head and tail. The voice curdled at his blood and yet Hezran felt relief; his sight, his arm, his hope returned. And his hearing torn soon after.

The winds around him stirred, not from lack, but from pulsing winds, before solid fibre hit him like a weight.

“Get going. This is something to be settled between my lady—Feena and me.” Elsenlied, the knight prentice no longer. There was a score to settle for her brother, for her mentor and for a friend.

“But how…” The portal had closed and Reivyn’s suffering had put to end, though still too weak to stand. The shimmering blade in Elsen’s hands pulsed familiar, just enough for him to know. “Will you be okay?”

“I’d rather you not underestimate my training. Slaying a hydra or two should be well within a feat. In the first place I’m not fighting, just buying time. Time enough for you to hold your promise or die trying. If you should come back down before the end then—“

He didn’t need to hear no more. Hezran pulled Reivyn from the ground and grabbed the rope that dangled, lifting them to the skies. Only when the sound of exhaust had faded to a hum did Elsenlied return to face.

“Now it’s just the two us. Just like old times.”

“Old times indeed.”

--

Frozen Flames

In front of him under the grey skies darkened by foreboding clouds lay a barren mountain range, red blood spilling from its tips. Even from this distance he could feel the molten heat being exuded in the volcanoes waking breaths; see the crimson tears it spilled forth at each yawn.

A crystalline pathway formed before him, where the vessel’s nimble wolf companion made its steps. As if being led on, he was dragged involuntarily in following the beast’s footsteps as it led them up towards a screeching hollow. Several glowering gazes could be felt from within the darkness, but still the vessel showed no intent of stopping its unbidden approach.

As they entered into the darkness several shadows could be seen flickering within. With neither the time nor will to retreat the vessel plainly cut its way forward as it dashed towards the end of the sinister hallway.

By the time they reached the other side his body felt wet with foul stench and his vision blurred. In front of them loomed a true lizard of lore spewing fire hotter than the mountain itself. This time even the chill brought about by the wolf’s tracks was not enough to abate the heat as they watched the stony canvas melt into grey puddles.

Still, paying no heed to his own safety, he soon found himself holding steel blade in hand and thrusting through the dissipating wall of ice to pierce the dragon’s heart. As the form that surrounded the sword evaporated the frozen edge of the blade once again revealed itself, along with a black ball of shimmering ice at its tip. A single moment of hesitation existed before the blade was brought down in one swift motion to meet the ground, shattering the ice as well as the stone and steel that resided within at once.

As they abandoned the cavern there were no longer any presences left to watch them and the red flows had already subsided to black encasements, the weather once again returning to its natural frigid state. Yet, even with the sky above cleared of black clouds to reveal its calm, deep blue layering, no relish was to be had in victory.

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Signs of Upheaval

“What are we dealing with?”

“Sir! We’ve gathered the troops around the perimeter, as asked plain-clothed and sparse, and the more equipped pocketed at the near and ready. There’s yet to be a spot of opening and the gates are sealed tight; we’re of the opinion that the faculty are cooperating at least to a partial extent. There was some mild noise at the beginning, but by the time we reached they’d gone silent.”

“Good, we wouldn’t want to wake the neighbours. For now it is most important that we keep the peace, make sure there are no spillovers…though how ironic that our most secure fortress kept to seal our secrets be used against us such.” The King’s Right tapped his chin with an odd smile. “What of our people inside.”

“…Nothing.”

“Well, that’s fine. We can only expect so much from a sympathetic. Given the girl’s achievements it would have been too much to relegate her away to some backwater district, or farther down, I suppose.” A muffled scream bound up along the back. The body parcel strapped along the wall shook as if calling out for help. “And you needn’t mind that. It is just…an experiment.”

“A-as you say, sir.”

“Now then captain, it’s time you take your leave.”

“But doesn’t his highness need to know—“

“I will tell *his highness* in due time. Or would you rather be the one to disturb him?”

More than just the icy glare, one glance of his liege’s eyes glazed and pitchforked down below was enough to turn the man post haste. Perhaps it was a bit too much considering the rattle left behind, but even then the king did not flicker, but for a single mumble: “What has happened?”

“Nothing his highness has need concern with. He need only look down upon the most fantastic board been set.” There and then gone, a condescending tone seemed forgotten in place of utmost loyalty and respect. Perhaps a sharper wit may have seen through the guise…

“Indeed.” Even the king’s voice slurred, on the verge of transforming into something unrecognizable.

The Right Hand knew well: For all its power each drop of wisdom vanished from the crown. “Yes, it will all be over…very soon.”

--

Bird Beyond Reach

“My dearest, dearest brother.” No sooner had Hezran got to the top of the knot and he was already back to ground, grinded beneath a heel with tone far sweeter than the face. “I’ve been waiting for you on edge with fears.”

*Fears.* The word seemed odd coming from her mouth; even more so now, perhaps more disgruntled, because she didn’t know what tune to play. The change wasn’t entirely unwelcome.

“Would this be your true face?”

“Who knows? People have many faces; weren’t you the first to say.” Everyn still remembered, all those days buried long and short ago surfaced to their minds. He had never had an answer then: *And what if the only face you knew was fake?*

“…Though some might strive to stick to one. Still, the more masks we get to know the greater sense we have of the true combined. The real face is just made one parts of many.” Nothing is lost. And nothing is futile.

“Is that so?” Was she unconvinced?

“Does it really matter? Definitely preferable to the skeleton’s corpse you brought her back as. And why didn’t you tell she was your sister there?”

*This voice…* Where was it coming from—around the left part of his ear? There was no space for yet another body. Perhaps that sparking tube that sat up off the ground?

“Yeah, it’s definitely me here alive and well enough for you to see…well, I suppose at least mostly.” Beneath the fuzz of flittering black and white Cull’s faced peered through, one side still covered from bandaged salve to treat the burns. And that wasn’t all. “The mad professor here got this all set up.” There was quite the audience set up behind the screen, even the reluctant made curious when enabled to peek across distances from a safer scene.

“The boy insisted you see—“

“I’m not that young anymore!”

“Wait a few years, and still even then. But as you can see we are well and good for now—” Darren’s words were covered with a blast. There was some movement in the background, but at least Darren kept his face completel calm, whether by design or actuality. “Just some mites at the door; believe me when I say my lady knows how to clean those up quite well. Rather for time you better be thinking on yourselves…” The connection grew fizzy for a moment as their plane jittered equal measure. “That’s as far as it goes. Better get your hands on that wheel so—“ Completely black and then pure white. They looked on up through the clear glass shield as the clouds gave to wisps of white before blue sky below the setting reddish sun.

And then began to fall…

Soon the black speck that had always seemed eternally far above dipped above their vision, a shaky ride of glowing readings before Hezran grabbed the leather with firm hands to level them once more. He was no pilot but enough to keep the speed; the rest he’d have to learn by paper as they flew.

Charging through the atmosphere on a shining silver steed, as they approached the cluttered city thousands upon thousands of pairs of eyes rose up, probably for a first; so many of which took their eternal loftiness for granted. For the very first time the sea of downcast heads took notice of something higher beside the reverent orb.

Fingers pointed and mouths were hanged to match. What thoughts did they have about the shining bullet that pierced their bearing night and cut through the gloom and ego of their might? More reactions than were people? And slightly different shades for most. The whole was quicker to render judgement.

Alarms blared as larger thumbs of twisted steel turned their way towards the arc. Barrel’s blazed and muzzles belched until a thousand bars of light came pierce the sky with balls of fire—as if a field of crimson loti bloomed in the azure.

The silvered, featherless bird danced amidst the blossoms shifting beyond known spectrums of hope and flight as if to defy all chains of logic; such that those watching forgot all fears…turned instead to wonder.

Even so it was only a matter of time. The swallowing field of fire only grew larger as the bullets came and pivoting in space through hands and thought could only last so long as a breath of air existed amidst the growing inferno’s vacuum.

“I told you! Freyr’s too well fortified. Even with the technology restored, for these hybrid rigs it will be too much. At this rate we won’t even make it halfway in!”

“So you said—” And so it was looking. A shell finally made impact with the casing and the sound of scattered sparks and crunching steel certainly made a case. “That didn’t stop you from forcing your way along.”

“I’ve got to see this to the end. For all our sakes you better make sure it’s not going to be so much sooner.”

“There’s only so much I can do.” Hezran’s teeth belied his calm. They were running out of options. The alarms inside were jarring, every sensor set alit. Where once their front was clear with blue, now it bled to blot all vision. A milder sense might have said the situation was looking quite sever—even deadly—as if trying to fit a threading needle through a non-existent hole. *If only someone, somewhere would make a tear…even just an inch…*

Sometimes wishes did come true. Just not in the way one would expect.

A quake traveled way up through the air. Pillars of fire and black smoke plumes blotted out the final, scalding rays of light reducing windswept minefields to a thick layer of greying fog.

“How—?”

A single shining light shot up like a giggling grin flitting through the fumes before bursting for a single sign, a signal for only two to know—*don’t screw up.*

“As if you’d be able to tell now…” but so Hal hadn’t completely given up after all. “It really is just the little things that add on up, though they leave yet bigger spots behind.” The idiots that could never wait their death…sometimes he admired them in brazenness. “I guess I should be thankful. It’s not just 50/50 anymore.”

Bursting through the smoke, the final castle had never been a closer sight as Hezran turned their nose along the final stretch. The walls were thick, though who knows how. Thankfully they had some cannons of their own.

*Click, Click…* “\*\*\*\* and just the moment too.” Finger pressed to trigger nothing happened, no flash or burst of sound…only sputtering. Too late to change course it seemed only the shuttle’s nose would serve as lance.

“This is suicidal!” That may have been the first time he heard Everyn scream herself. He really was blessed by dire circumstance.

“And this is what we call crisis management.” Hezran strapped his belt along the wheel to keep it steady and waved them all on back. Like any hull of certain make there was ample place and strappings along the sides; they may be running out of space, but no matter how mad things were there were still methods to be played. “Falling, I’m always falling. It’s almost strange how normal it feels.” Strangely peaceful, calm; as if there was nothing else to do but do.

“Now that’s something to fear—always climbing out of the wreckage and clambering up again to grasp the very blades that cut you down. Now if only we all could zombify our souls as well.”

“Is that what it looks like? …Is that how it is?” That rushing wall of blackness. Desperation? An insane, unfounded confidence? The last sane strand of will; survival, because… *Even more so when you find hope lost it’s all the more important to keep what hope remains. Hope, lest you find yourself drowned in hopelessness.*

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Execution (Rampage)

It was a magnificent procession. They walked together, tethered leg-and-paw and bathed in blinding light, cheers from either side. The dragon followed closely, snorting its warm breath upon their necks.

They were the slayers; the architects of victory; the destroyers of the darkest fears—and if only they had ever known…for now they walked in chains.

Even now the disembodied cranium came to nip their feet, the crowd’s exhilaration only grew in fervor. They screamed, they gleamed…more bloodthirsty a sight they’d never seen. From the parents to their children, intoxicated little goblins as they were, just waiting for the end—for the last one and its friend. There they were just steps together, yet only one could be the hero and for the other left a villain’s end.

He clenched his fists in anguish on skin far dry from sweat. His lips were white with salt, emptied what little left. He had done it all for love and was left with little but regret. *They would take it!* They would take it…everything, and the last thing that for him was left.

The procession opened wide; the sun beat brazenly on the center stage, a glowing blessing to demise. The king himself took center seat, but kept out far from reach. Between the two an iron man raised the final edge, a giant axe that claimed but for a single head, not before it took their bonds.

A single sweep took down the links leaving him only a last touch of comforting fur before the beast moved to the stand to lay its head if resting. No sooner they had left his side and stones and sticks were flown, far more than breaking bones. Once proud white and silver transformed to brown and red, becoming matted and clumped by injustice before the end. But still nobility…not even a single cry. *Why? Why won’t you cry?*

*Why did they laugh? Why did they boo?* And why did the king, that shrivelling patron of his words seem so cold and calm to raise his arm above the shallowly heaving chest. Then turn the finger down.

He was paralyzed. Why couldn’t he move? Why did the scenery seem to twist and turn beyond his whims? Scream! Shout! Reality was all a dream. A magic curtain to set everything to rights.

No such thing.

No matter the film that covered his eyes the king still smiled that same blunt smile, the crowd still crowed their brutal jeers. Depravity. The lightest thing remained the choppers hand.

*Snap…* A single jagged edge of blood and the head rolled to his knees. He couldn’t tell what broke. Was it his head or the sky, the fabrics of time and space around him, the very world some bastard’s son constructed? Whatever, it certainly wasn’t that it front of him.

It was still warm, didn’t you see? It still smelled, didn’t you see? It still nuzzled in his hands; felt warm within his mouth. Let the cluckers cuck. Let them cluck right to their graves.

Something hard slid down his throat. Something whole; something shattered. It pulsed and beat as any heart. Something glowed and filled with light. *Derision.* They were still with him. *Laughter.* Always with him.

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Girls Talk

“You seem angry, Feena.”

“Who, me? I’d rather not hear that from the fuming kettle.”

“Was his loss really all that much? Before you hardly bat an eye.”

“And you yourself, now taking up the sword in that loathsome’s place?”

“Waiting until all the strings are exposed to cut them is the least I could do.”

“Your friends have fled.”

“Your soldiers have left ahead.”

“It was their duty.”

“It was their purpose.”

“”We really are both two of kind.””

--

And All the Curtains Come Crashing Down

“The cannons have broken your highness.” The King’s Right raised his arms in feign of agony, but it seemed his warrant was unnecessary as all little but satanic gurgling came on back. “Hmm, so you’re already so far gone.”

His lordling’s bubbling flesh squelched with relish at each poke—if only it weren’t for the burning sting. “Really, you would do well to look after your diet. If only the others would see you know, though I suppose soon enough they’ll see nothing left!” It was all he could do to contain his giggles. The walls would come crashing down, everything would break, and there he would be at the end of the wreckage ripe for picking up.

There…that was the knell; the final bell.

“It is time…to kill the king.”

--

To Kill the King

A hole ripped right through the wall. Enough air to pass an elephant. It was no surprise that the hall was made silent, even Everyn having been knocked, but that was not what caught Hezran’s mind when he left the tearing hole.

*What is that?* That black and gurgling mass. The swirling, bubbling, putrid witches’ pot. It made one think a holy artifact that long had stewed corrupted, the staining chair’s embroidery barely serving as a cusp. That even the single one most close kept far from length.

“I appreciate your arrival at this time. You see I have no idea what’s left to do.” That grating calmness, Hezran remembered it well. There and there and there…that time as well. At every crucial point the voice and not the man. Now at center stage and even more so; this is what truly needed striking down. “Now, now no need to hurry. Can’t you see it flooding over, or do you really want to cross that murky path. No…I think your worries are much closer than all that.”

What did that mean? Wait… *What was that?* It wasn’t liquid but something solid hit the floor.

Reivyn slumped to the ground, head down, with a hand clutched to her chest. There was a glow; not the usual glow. Nothing sinister, but Hezran could tell it took its toll. “What is this?”

“I could only imagine, but maybe it really is that a fake can never make the real thing.”

How did he know about that? It should have been something lost to void and maybe even dream. It had been Herzan alone to view in his glimpse unto the unending darkness. But then that smog; only the slightest: Was it really only him that knew?

Just as much he couldn’t see, as an unearthly chill crawled up his very toes. Hezran stepped back and he’d carry her farther, it only took a single touch to know. *This is bad!* Insidious, unyielding emotions of the dark side split from soul, enough to make one slit their own.

Then he saw his own hands, covered in ooze. Fuzzy; soul-taking. Spreading; sticking; staining. Could he even touch her now? …Is this what she had always kept to felt?

His vision turned grey. His body turned cold. His mind went numb, a statue paralyzed just before the crack. It was like the fading fog had taken liquid form; the essence of water but in reverse and more potent poison that any other he had ever known. Something that defied expectation and denied being cured. Dominating and transforming—one’s world view twisted until none remained once more and the halo that perched the head was sat on feet.

It was okay to give into to impulse. *He’d already done it.* It was okay to tear it down. *It was already broken*. It was okay to fade away. *There was nothing left behind.*

So why did it feel so warm? Why at the center of his heart did he know he needed struggle? Why did the corrupted skin that he’d drawn upon himself take form, just to crumble away?

Maybe it wasn’t him. Maybe it wasn’t from his own core himself. The light he’d given others was something he’d always felt a mere shadow of himself. Even as if he was just a shadow…

He needed to respond—to tear it all away—even as he eroded all the same. Make drop of his fears, his misgivings and his hate. The sun’s glow wouldn’t wait.

*A glow…*a shine that spread its warmth. She had protected him once again. Or maybe it wasn’t her but the ones who stood behind them; the many others who propped them with their hands and their hope. Even the dark pools reflections all but waned away. Enough to see the monster underneath…or rather that all surrounded them—lay within each and every one of them.

It was a demon. It was human. It was a monster with a greying face, octopus arms pulsing and writhing; taking root and extending to cover all along their swelling reaches. Before long the crumbling hall beneath the evening sky had sunken to a starlit orb, the sole flare busting in its midst providing sight. A single sphere obtruded where the world had once stood.

The stomach of the void. The reddening suckers of demise released a purplish fluid to fill the gap; to crush the defiant beneath its swirling sea. The face howled an outlandish scream as if for flesh that slowly scalded as even it was blotted out by ink…and sure enough the crushing force and waves descended.

Hezran could only shut his eyes, powerless in the moment, only short enough to miss the clash. Truly the unstoppable force verses the unbreakable object. Where no wall of any physicality could have borne the weight a shimmering film seemed to keep the waves bay.

Which each of the hechatonchieric slaps of hands the field beat a drumming pulse, steamed like acid, but never quite to give away. It smelt burnt as flesh, like a cooker pressed with steam. They lived but each moment the senses that slipped through grew all the thicker; their sense of selves grew gradually smaller. Even as their protector remained unbroken it was pushed steadily closer to their skin. …But that was not what would be their end.

*Where?* This danger seemed to spread from somewhere closer, the aura came from near within. It was not in fact black but purple, a mix of poisoned spores not quite dead in yet. Reivyn, silent until now, coughed—it was not only blood that surfaced form her mouth. The very same, that putrid liquid, and it seemed there only more to come.

“Reivyn!” There was only so much he could do. He knew how to soothe a cough—lemon water and something sweet and he could rub her back as well. This disease was something he could do nothing about, nor so easily split from self.

*You needn’t worry. Or perhaps you should.* There it was again. Strange he thought he saw a shadow of itself; a being of many forms. Not just it but many others, of many other different colors. *Now’s the time to prove yourself.*

An aurora. He had never seen one, but that was all he could think to describe it, that shimmering stairway of rainbow curtain falls. There but not quite. A visible illusion that somehow remained palpable to the touch. It seemed to head upwards but he knew that was not the direction it actually led. Reality itself was twisted to reflect the heart—and not only his.

On the first step he saw an image of mountains, the skyline that lay below the giant’s vision that Reivyn had told him all about.

On the second, a field of snow below the ocean, where crystal flakes would always fall.

On the third, a pillar of fire extended to infinity the only realm that might call home and the gemlike scales that slithered within.

On the fourth, a vortex made of air yet none still enough to breathe.

On the fifth gravity, unseeing and always dark but feeling all the same. The grate of the earth and crunch of rock and the force of always crushing as cool carapaces burrowed though the sand.

And last, the final step; the one that brought them to the end. Before the withered face he saw the memories—the memories of two together who couldn’t be more different amidst promises both broken and protected; smiled and cried for; cherished only to feel too strongly.

“So this is it.” *This is why you brought me here.* Love was selfish and one-sided and could be incredibly cruel. It was sad; it was beautiful; it was bittersweet. It brought a tear to his dried out eyes; not of pain but of pure feeling and neither borrowed but his own. *Tragedy…corrected in tragic.* How it must have felt to turn the very sword against own flesh—and to continue twisting.

*Do it! …before even I lose my will and fade away.*

Hands on his own. Maybe he should be thankful he didn’t remember the final moment. It was a private moment just for them.

The song she sung was a lullaby.

His fragile, shattered soul wailing was embraced.

And together they should fade away, like an image.

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Voice from the Stars

“So he’s done it. Well that’s too bad. Good but…each time, I’d rather not go through this all again.”

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Future’s Passed – Blast of Pain

There was the sound of a gunshot. The sound of a trigger letting lose an armament of linking gears and matches that blasted fragile peace’s deluge.

Hezran hadn’t had a moment. No sooner had the darkness slipped away and too late for flight to safety and yet still. He left his hand to cradle the back of Reivyn’s waking head, pushing them both beneath, smaller, in the hope they might escape the devil’s final breath; for indeed there was a breath. Panicked, rapid, but vaporous as made sense.

“Ha…Ha…Phew! Well, that was a touch closer than I had intent. Any longer and I would have been digested just as well.” More than just bluster—it was the first time Hezran had seen a skeleton sweat; that and smoking barrel tilted in its hand. “To think it even had my clothes. No matter I suppose soon enough the finest tailors in the land will be compelled to do my bidding.”

The devil overstayed its due. For dreadful seconds they waited in anticipation of a second bullet’s scream… They waited for the stinging point and life’s warm trickle freed from punctured veins to drain them of their hard won warmth…

“Really I can’t thank you both enough.” Gratitude…was it? “I couldn’t have done it without you. But now…it’s time to clear the trash away.” That crown, it sat a size too big.

Neither him nor her, they had no energy left to run; barely the thought to fear the end. Was it over? Was this the end?

“Indeed.” There it came again, the whistle. “A gift from your daughter—that you’d be a naked king for but a moment.”

Hezran’s paleness echoed Reivyn’s face. Frightened, shivering…yet clear of pain. Their teeth were clenched and their lips were broken and yet…both were free of fatal sweat.

Had the bullet missed? Wherefore was the cause and when another? Weary numbers flitted through his frazzled mind until—*Ah… There was that.*

Hezran had almost forgotten and for the new enthroned it served a greater shock as the unseen bullet shined on through. “Ah… Is that so?” A flitting, weasel smile and what remained a man before he fell. The puppet had served the strings be cut.

“This is no time for calmness.” Just as Hezran had left Everyn from equation in turn he had forgotten something closer by. Briefly he remembered a squirming package that had lain nearby before the torrential acids came.

Bidden by her voice he found it. His own body lying limp in sight.

It was if his vision blurred itself, trying to twist yet another further horrid reality upon more pleasant states. But it was only that… A half-second state of self-denial forced in upon himself, and one that could not last.

Pooling crimson, spreading and filling grooves with rust. A chained man still, and always sunken. One in the heart and one in the brain, it didn’t take a medic to see the pain.

He was dead. I was dead.

What kind of twisted sort of fate would present him such a scene? What kind of paradoxical nightmare would allow himself die before his own? Or maybe it was doom itself that chased him down this road—then what for, when the bullet clearly missed its mark…would it take him too? But they were different. Still.

“I wouldn’t give up yet.” Maybe her cold concern was better. As Everyn traced a line of blood along the corner of his other mouth she felt a touch of movement. “There’s still a chance, but not for me.”

Yes. Neither of them had a talent in curing the dead. Their skills lay more in death.

That said there were others. A mad doctor and the only link he knew. Hezran had never thought he’d miss that rolling ball of flab so much as now.

“You called.” Not the man but yet a sharper tone. How much of a shock had he been in not to notice their approach. There was no time to wait for further greetings, neither him nor her.

No sooner had Reise arrive and she was already well at work, taking spare red packages from the depths of her coat. She set up the needle and wrapped the wounds as she could to slow the flow, but more past that what was really needed was magic. Without the tissue to form only the slight white glow of healing stood a chance at building back the channels enough to stem a loss. For such delicate work what was needed more than power was the imagination and the experience to see exactly how each strand connects; Hezran could think of no one better. But as for who would bring her Hezran could not have been more surprised.

“You really hadn’t thought I would have caught on by now?” Iris had caught him completely off-guard. “Or so I’d like to say, but you even had me going for a while though I had my doubts. If it weren’t for those strange transmissions and their uncanny telling of the truth I wouldn’t have dared to make a move. So, do you have anything to say?”

“Thank you and sorry.”

“I really think it’s better the other way around. In the end it’s probably good I was only kept so much in the dark. If I knew the full truth I would have felt obliged to stop you, even with my sympathies, however, if it is to save a life…the rules are meant to be bent a bit.” She was smiling, he supposed that was good; even if she wouldn’t show her real relief on face.

“What now?”

“I suppose I could set and kill you, but with things gone as far as they have I don’t see how that would serve the kingdom, let alone do I have someone left to command. That and a few peculiar of my cute students begged I stay my hand. In the end in my deferred capacity as teacher I was compelled to offer help at least in silence. Without their commotion it would have been a lot harder to steal a white robe from prison. We should at least be thankful that the nobility has little stomach for public massacre.” It was fine as long as the blood stayed deep beneath the surface. The separation allowed them to remain pure up at front.

“Since the cat’s out of the bag already, I don’t suppose I could entertain you to a drink after settling down.”

“You don’t seriously mean that.” Nothing had changed, yet everything. “In any case I prefer a man a touch more genuine.”

“Thanks. Hearing it clearly…helps a lot. I’m sure he’ll appreciate it even more. The Ardent know he needs it.”

“Then we’ll call it even. But there’s one last thing you need to do.”

“I know. I just haven’t figured out exactly how to—”

“Idiot!” Ever of misdemeanour, his sister hit him from behind. “Don’t you know all this time you’ve had the key.” Not in a literal sense but more figuratively. Indeed it wasn’t a pleasant thought to imagine flesh turning in a lock. And it wasn’t written either.

“You don’t think that cunning man would dare to take the throne alone do you?” Far too suspicious, both and restricting. “What better time to have a puppet chid slip from hiding?”

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Inside the Fortress

“Don’t you think it’s gotten quiet?”

“Yeah…” *too quiet.* They had only locked themselves in a short while, as a way to fulfill a promise. She didn’t know the reason why…but if they were there.

“Have you finally had enough now? Isn’t it about time you let us out and take down these barricades so we can breathe some air?” Another girl spoke up from the other side of the iron bars

“You make quite the joke. If every fugitive army made leave there arms as soon as silence then there would have never been any hope of success at any time” Mai was thankful. Without their help she doubted she would have been able to convince so many or keep them quiet otherwise.

“And what’s wrong with that? It’s only right that you turn yourselves in and accept your judgement—especially your lot for cooperating with such mudslingers.”

And Mai fully intended too, but… “Not yet.” There was still an itching feeling at the back of her mind that this was only at the scratching on the surface, the eye before the storm. She couldn’t imagine this ending so quietly, not with them behind the scenes—only clutching tighter to her bearings as she waited for the silent tremors to turn into something more.

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Starfall

“Was it alright to leave it all to them?”

“I’m sure it is. In the first place how many people do you think would believe a nameless’ words?” It would be a joke. After all, the king never dies. “More importantly, I hope you know how to operate this thing because as far as I’m aware I’m clueless.”

“Let me get that for you before you start to take it all apart. It’s not a television you know.”

“You were really fond of it.”

“Yet again, you know that was all an act. I suppose I wouldn’t mind sometime, with whatever’s left. Here.”

At the very top above the crumbling hall they found a small room, barely enough for three places, and squeezing in they saw through broken, one-way windows the city still bustling amongst the darkened shades of grey.

It had been Hezran’s own selfish insistence that he be the forward guard and now that they had reached it was his turn to pay a closer role of care. *You alright?*

*Better, thanks.* Enough for Reivyn to force a stand on her two feet it seemed.

*You could have stayed below to rest.*

*No, I wanted to see it up above. The same view you see. The same views you will see.* A journey was taken two steps at a time, but it took more to make the trail.

By now Everyn had skimmed through the table, through flickering tabs and denser print. A yellow sign flashed up but she remained silent, unperturbed and then— “Going through with this…a lot is going to be lost. A lot of people will suffer, and more will find it hard to cope.” She stared deep within Hezran’s eyes, with her own two strong. “You could take all the blame. You’ll never be able to show your face again—below or above…” And for her it would be the most painful thing of all. Trained as a tool, made into a weapon and now… She was so weak—she couldn’t bear to part.

“I’m sorry.” Hezran had a lot to apologize for. “When you’re really desperate and when you can’t hold on no longer—when you really need me most. Just call my name. I promise I’ll come, no matter the distance; no matter the time. I’ll be there to stand at your side.” Bonds that formed, you could change them, but they never truly broke away.

“It better be a promise.”

“And if ever I should break it I would swallow a thousand needles.” Even if she wasn’t real, even if all those years were weak, and not one drop of blood were shared between. She was his sister. She was his family. She was the one who was with him through the worst of his days, and so he wished to be for her, even when he was rather far away.

“…Then the honors?”

“Of course.” He would never burden her with the touch alone.

The three of them put their hands as one—in happiness, in sorrow, and in sin. At this Place that Lies Closest to the Stars.

The engines sputtered and the ballast gradually gave away. One minute they were floating, and the next they had already begun to fall.

Dropping through the clouds the barrier globed above began to falter letting in first breaths of cold and snow.

“If there is one thing I’ll really miss from here, being up so high, it’s the view. Everything seems so small…” Really, everything was so small, his strife and struggle; his memories and his bonds; the darkness he had sought and fought; even his hopes and his dreams. Sheer vastness left the tears to drop, but even so he knew he had his anchor.

Beyond that small pocket of stable land, was a vast swaying ocean reaching out as far as the eye could see—places he knew nothing about, facets he had never known…like that bit of green that peaked out far beyond the coast as the tides waned below the fading sun.

Every bit of steel they had gathered along the way—that pieced their souls; and every piece that was left to fill the frame. Every one eternally valuable in helping guide their way.

People panicked, flowing like rivers against a few stable bends eroded back and forth with time. Their proof of life reached them even here high above on mast. Maybe it was them alone that stayed strangely free of fear.

Bits and pieces breaking off, burning like single shining stars singing through the atmosphere; some crumbling away to shimmering specks of dust to nothing, while others held on shaking, cracking and breaking, but never to completely vanish.

It was warm; comforting; familiar…as if it was something he had experienced thousands; millions; an infinite number of times before.

An image flashed. A remembrance of descent. One of skies erupt over a clockwork world vast with grey. A scattering of shimmering colours spread across the stratosphere painting lines of red across the sky; a central pillar burning blue straight towards the ground. Countless impacts that shattered the earth and broke through to murkier waves and white setting the world ablaze in blue, a single alien seed planted to the core.

“Starfall…” *The tears…they won’t stop…*

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Page #1

*If you’re reading this you must have made it to this point. I’m proud of you, my son.*

*…There’s something you must know. This planet is dying…*

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Wraith

“…Hieeghhh!!” How had it come to this? He was a holy man; one of standing who should have had nothing to fear even if the bones of mud-caked runts would dare to tell more tales. “How dare you— Don’t come any cl-closer! De-de-desecrating this holy ground. Y-you won’t, you won’t be forgiven.”

“Forgiven by whom I wonder. I’m sure the devil held downstairs could hardly care less from who it eats.”

Backed against the carved engraved with roots one hand reaching for the candles fire the clergy stopped full step. “How’d, how did you know? N-no one should have known!”

His assailants didn’t speak, simply inching closer to cement terror’s imagination in a fragile, breaking mind.

“Stay back!!”

“What’s wrong father? Surely you’d be more than happy to give your own in faith of the holy messenger. Lord knows you haven’t been one to spare.”

“Y-you’re mistaken! C-calm down! I had no-nothing, nothing to do with it. “

“And the ragged, the children, the miserly who came in hopes of deliverance… I wonder if they would say the same? Can’t you here their voices? Can’t you hear their screams!?”

“The church will never let you free. The law will catch you and burn you at the stake!” Even in its tattered state the organizations and systems would still work that much. In the first place it was precisely because of the tattered state of the world that this man was able to get away with the things he had, and no one turned to bat an eye. But…

“That’s cute! He thinks we’re just you’re common robbers. Ones to run of fear of authority, of religion. I’m sorry to say my dearest father, we’ve long run afoul of the right.”

“Y-you! No you can’t be!?”

“Come now, it will only sting a little. Just a little bit of red. I promise it won’t hurt!” The glint of embroidered steel in the shadows hand told a different story. “All you need is to hold out your hand, isn’t that right? We only need a little blood to quench the demon’s thirst!”

“And…a-and what happens after.”

“Don’t worry we’ll make sure to put you’re flesh to good use, in order to make *our* dreams come true!”

“Aeigghhhh!” The fragile and fearful can’t help but bow to the most present of their fears, and perhaps that was the priest’s only saving grace for though he backed away, both head and body turned against the stone, a single arm still remained outstretched in want of lesser pain and in hope that the latter would never come to pass.

Only a single gash was needed. A straight line along the wrist and through the veins spurted plenty, but no so much that the flow could not be guided. Still, the chalice’s rim was not so wide it could be taken easily.

“Oh oh oh, be careful with that. It’d be a shame if any dripped, isn’t that right father.” Already some had started coat both cloak and mask. “We wouldn’t want to have to start all over again.” That was the final straw. Eyes rolled back to his brain the priest’s arm grew limp in hand.

Once the chalice came to full, a smooth surface of ironed fluid glimmering just before the tip, Hezran bound the wound with ointment and bandage as Reivyn worked her magic on the flow. “That should so it.”

Though the priest’s face was flushed of blood and his skin a touch more pale a steady beat could still be felt between the fingers. The wound once slick and large had shortened. It wouldn’t fester and just enough was left to dull the hint of healing hands.

“Thanks for your hard work—the both of you. Now, if you’ll let me do the honors.” Taking the chalice in his hand Hezran poured the precious liquids down the maw to fill the gaps and watched as green roots grew red, a sound both earthy and mechanical cursing from the wall.

Beneath their very feet the floor began to shift. With the turning of gears, panels of floors slipped further down into the earth forming a staircase of souls leading down to fouler dreams. Taking the lead Hezran placed each foot before the other in careful stride. Though each step had no doubt once been pearl white, each memory cracked by roots had now rusted brown with the scent of drying blood.

At the end they came across a chamber, just large enough to fit two bodies side by side and a small crusted pedestal at its depths. “Looks like it’s too late for this one.”

It had already turn pitch black, like coal, a thick miasma coating from its surface and beyond. A crystal core of memories tainted by evil made evil in itself.

*How do they appear like this?* It was something that never happened in his memory. Would they really have been able to cover so many and with such ease? The sudden propagation… Drips from beyond the ever-darkening sky.

The face on the back of the wall twisted in a banshee’s scream releasing an ephemeral specter from its jaws, yet solid enough to cut surrounding stone to ribbons and drain the blood of prey in search of solid form. In order to create a new body of its own in which to rampage on the earth.

Alas its existence was so fragile. A cut in space severed its windswept body straight in half to vanish as the roots behind writhed in burning, leaving entire hopes undone.

The shrouded stone in center slowly began to fade in colour before shattering to pieces as a spirit far too overdone. “I’m sorry we could only do so much.” The least he could do was clasp his hands in prayer.

*Better this than the other…* It wasn’t much forgiveness from the one most hurt of all, but it was better than nothing. Better than letting exist a twisted form gone wrong.

“It’s already done is it?” A body crept down from the shadows. “You’re getting better and better. Any longer and I wouldn’t have had a trace to follow. It’s almost scary.”

“Sometimes I even find myself lost in the act. “ And maybe it wasn’t just him. “You snuck out again.”

Far from her public face, Everyn was dressed in the familiar black body armour he had gotten so used to seeing her of late.

“Well I wanted to see what was happening with you. If I stayed cooped up in that gilded cage stamping documents and weaving pretty words all day I’d sooner drive insane.”

“I’m amazed you tracked us down, though I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised. Are you sure it’s safe diverting resources like that?”

“Just a little. Plus it wasn’t like the others weren’t interested as it was. There’s less distraction now.”

“And after all that effort… I assume you saw the prize we left upstairs?”

“Don’t worry I’ll deal with it. With how he looks and this room to show I don’t they’ll be any trouble.” She had more experience than any of them with this sort of thing thanks to her black ops work. “Still, are you sure about this? If we just kept quiet no one would ever know…”

“Scum is scum is person. He’s still got plenty he needs to atone for. Just as we.”

“I wish I had your faith.”

“Faith… I suppose that’s one way of looking at it. Just make sure he’s worked ragged to the bone.” Death was simple; living was much, much harder. “Since you’re already here I don’t suppose you’d have any news. I know this one is especially eager to her about her dearest friend. How’s she been doing since we left? I hope there wasn’t too much trouble with the crash.” Perhaps out of all of them Mai had the wildest ride through these past few months of turbulent times. Captured, judged, trained, bullied, crashed into the earth, and then resurfaced once again; all the time without hardly a friendly contact or any knowledge of the truth. Reivyn certainly wasn’t happy with his adamance on the matter.

“Don’t worry. That girl’s smarter than she looks; got a good eye too. In the end it seems she’s set on staying. She said she didn’t really have anywhere else to go back to, seeing how one-half of which were gone and the other on the hide, though she did think she’d miss the others she had left behind. At this point she still isn’t sure she could face them, but someday… Besides she’s made her own friends here—her own life. And she thinks she understands, if only just a little, you’re feelings and your path. And the reasons you keep at bay.”

“Is that so? I’m glad, though a bit surprised. It’s her choice to make.”

“She’s already been a big help for us. The after-crisis at the academy moved really smoothly thanks to her being there. Once you strip the birds of wings they suddenly realize they don’t know how to land, let alone anything else. She was the first to believe, and it helps to have someone who knows how to walk on their own two feet.”

Reivyn clutched Hezran’s robe half-tight, holding retrieved shards with what was left. Whether she planned to keep them as an ornament of the day or use them some other way, Hezran didn’t know.

“We’ll miss her.” It was one thing he was sure of. “So how does it feel, if I may ask, your queenship?”

“Forget it! The instant I heard them say it I cringed from the very bottom of my soul. Besides it’s not like we’re going to be a monarchy much longer. There’ll be a proper government, one that can interact on familiar and equal terms with those established on the ground, even if originally that was just a guise, removing the stigma of the crown.”

“But until then you’re still the head. Are you sure you’ll be alright” Truth was Hezran was already regretting the burden he’d placed her with, in some ways largely more immense than his own come passed.

“I’ll be fine. Besides it’s not like I’m really alone, and for all the pain he was that man never missed a detail.”

“That might just be the biggest understatement of the year. Still, if there’s anything we can do, don’t hesitate. It may impossible for us to act openly, but if it comes to forming a crestless shield from your enemies or a saving rope to pull you to the shadows. We’re family, right. There’s nothing I would stop at to keep you safe.”

“Besides maybe her…?” An accusing finger pointed to his side, more jealous than angry.

“I would never give up on you.”

“Yeah, yeah, I understand—“

Their banter was a refreshing time for both of them, but it could only last solong before the callings of reality pulled them back to fore.

“Is that a call you’ve got?” The sound was slight, but the red blink unmistakable against coarse rock.

“I thought I shut it off before I left! …It’s the emergency line.” Darren had arranged the com systems for dire circumstances with a backup generator kicked in according to a special signal to bypass the main.

“You didn’t tell anyone when you left—” A mix of apprehension of two different sorts.

“Mostly anyone.” In the first place the network was not so large, at least not those with such added features as of yet. Being as important of a time as it was it would hardly be surprising if any number of people were trying to get in touch. Now that he looked his own set showed similar symptoms, narrowing down the list of possible perpetrators even further.

Seeing that only made each of them more reluctant. What disaster would possibly warrant reaching out to them both? Still, time’s worst attribute would only leave things worse and so Hezran compelled himself to flip the switch.

A small square lit up with static, slowly giving way to a brighter image, though still fuzzy perhaps because of the layers of mineral that lay between. It wasn’t long before a familiar voice spewed out from the circular holes on the side.

“Good…! Thank Ard you’re both there…” The way she phrased it…it was almost as if there were those that weren’t.

“…Did someone disappear?”

“That doctor of ours I needed to talk to her about something in regards to my hubby’s condition—“

“Ah, how’s he been? I’m sorry I couldn’t make it the wedding.” His presence would have been weird enough as it was, given his resemblance to the groom. Probably bad luck to have a doppelganger come to his own wedding anyways; for both sides.

“And I wouldn’t have tortured you through it, and though there is some work still to be done to soothe his dreams he’s all the better. More importantly the one who put her drastic concoction of lifesaving glue to patch him up has gone straight off the wall. Papers, vials, patients; even that precious twisted metal bat of hers was laid down to ground without her anywhere in sight. It was just like—“

*Just like the corpse beneath the rubble…* He remembered it better than any, the very first he’d came once returned to ground. He’d returned to the scattered cleaves of rock for visit of his most compatriot enemy, the thundering invader that trembled warnings with each step, only to find the grave scattered and empty from beneath. Hezran had first thought desecration; that he might have returned the valiant knight his proper burial, but when his scratching hands finally reached the surface nothing of a metal plate, of battered flesh—even powder—or gauntlets could be found, just scorched markings where the thunder had fallen. At least the protégé was still safe at earth for now.

“That’s worrying; I hope nothing else is happening out of sight.” It was already enough to try and clean the mess they made and then there was the foreboding note his father had left within a notebook of blank pages and jagged edges.

“And it’s not just her.” Playfulness had left from Everyn’s face. “The scientist; his wife; the thieving boy. One by one they disappeared. Though the latter knowing, it could just be a prank of sorts. The problem is the silence and suddenness and smoke that were left behind.”

“And just after the man had told the truth…” that in fact Darren had been Hezran’s inductee into this world in memories that seemed so long ago. And that he had kept his promise and secreted away his baby sister to a family in want of a secret talent without a name or past that needed be replace. Far, but always closer by than Hezran would dare think.

“If it were only that…” Hezran could hardly imagine more after all that. Then again it was also first for him, seeing Iris’ quiet stoicism so usurped by plainer panic. Evidently his imagination ran too thin.

“I hope we aren’t already witnessing the future’s start of bloody marital problems?”

“…” Even the familiar deadpan retort was gone. That was all the hint he needed.

“What happened?”

“I don’t know who or how or why—someone got the noose around his neck. They’ve pinned all the blame: the deaths, the carnage, terrorism. Not the least the kingslaying; deicide to some. Everything! It’s all been put on him!”

“That hardly makes any sense at all! Let alone the fact he’d never left the sky and wouldn’t have been able to get anywhere near the places they would have had him been there were more than enough witnesses to the crime against the king. Yes he was there plain as day, but it would have been obvious to anyone nearby that he had nothing to do with it, much the later. The bullet in his head, the shackles; neither were enough?”

“That’s what you’d think, but there’s no one left to testify on his behalf. I’m too close to him, his sister would too if her fosters hadn’t already forced her shut. They’ll hardly take a fallen scientist’s word without salt; not even if they weren’t dealing with crucial projects in their own rights. The other soldiers that should have been there to see…”

“Were they killed?”

“Not in the least. It’s worse than that. When they woke up from their *concussions* their memories were all jumble and fuzz. I’d thought that time would make it better, maybe they’d come round enough to at least proclaim another. In fact they can hardly remember any other presences at all. To them the mere fact that the regicide occurred at all seems proof enough of case.”

“How is that possible?!” This was tampering with memories they were talking about here, although somewhat whimsical in nature—but to be so far removed. “Someone, somehow— Things like this don’t just happen!” As it was he had barely left the hospital and now… They all knew that two miracles was one too many. “At least the records for the gates—something must have been left behind.”

“All of it, erased. And if that wasn’t enough new materials have surfaced, indistinguishable from the real to even my own biased eyes, those which would place him in the envoy of the king. You can add the mark of traitor to his list of crimes.”

“…How much time do we have?”

“I tried, and for a time it seemed like it might keep awhile for more important matters to discuss. That was until they found the makings of a bomb piled short below the conference stage, not yet live.”

“Was there any proof?”

“Of course, there wasn’t proof, but there was no need for anything such at that point with nothing to state otherwise, no signs of any crystal core, and the machinery hinted far too complex to have originated from either side. And his, your, fingerprints were also found on the scene. Needless be said my voice alone was far from enough, at this it hardly mattered—someone needed to take the blame. It’s not just one but both sides had their say, and they both scream the same. At the break of dawn he’s set to hang just short of breaking neck, after which with magma oil stuffed in ears and mouth; and all other sorts of holes…he’ll be drawn to quarters; each waxed for showing and handed amongst four corners for remembrance of the past.”

“They’ve certainly spared no effort. It might’ve been enough to make even me regret living thus far.”

“You’ve managed to draw the ire of all, for better or for worse.”

“Seriously… Whoever did this really didn’t leave any holes; enough to make even me believe in the possibility that I myself had done it if it weren’t for my believing my remembrance and my sights of stranger things. It’s so bad it might be funny.” He couldn’t laugh though, what came out was more of croak.

“How can you be so casual about this?! He was framed!” Framed: The method unbelievably meticulous, more than just a little strange, and, perhaps, just a touch supernatural.

“Oh, trust me, I’m not. It’s not like our mastermind didn’t leave any holes to travel.” In fact they had left just one, blaringly obvious, yet one no sane man would ever admit. “If we do it right, things might even turn out for the better, though my other half will still have to deal with strange and suspicious eyes for a small while.”

“…” Even through a hollow screen both saw similar reflections in the other’s eyes. And if Iris could tell as such it wouldn’t be long before Everyn noticed too.

“If it’s going to be like that, then I—“

“No you won’t. It’s not something any of us can afford at this time. What do you think would happen if the new throne, still fresh of blood, went on to claim innocence? The least result would be a loss of faith; the worst a brand new cause for instability.”

A touch of water spouted from the corners of Everyn’s once frosted eyes. “But—”

“What else do you expect me to do? We can’t afford to break down in tears and cry. No, this is exactly the point when we should be smiling, after all it’s not like we’ve been left no cards to play.”

“Are you planning just to die?!”

“Not even if you asked yourself.”

“Then why—“

“You cut us far too short. In fact, this might have been exactly the moment we’ve been waiting for…”

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Execution (Pause)

Furor echoed in the stone and through the bars of steel, promoting footsteps cometh to take him to his ashes. The key turned unlocking his eternal cage to let the cold maw of bone on in. Severed of his shackles he was none the more to feet, instead latched by coarse cut thread and dragged to scrape his knees his arms numbed limp to pain.

Here he was, again so close to death. Here was again on the brink. He had finally gained back what he so desired, what he had lost and yearned since long ago. Here he was on the brink of losing it all again, the only silver lining in that this time the blackness would take him too—this time only him.

The beating drums grew louder as his own only dampened in reflection, white light that came engulf more blinding than heavens’ gates shunning the eyes of the fallen and those falling farther evermore.

Thankfully he couldn’t see.

The sound of wooden wheels and creaking rope beckoned him upwards, his fingers tracing a lingering trail of dirt before fresh wounds were made sting by open air. Ah, fresh air… How long had it been?

By the time the creaking came to stop barely a tip of flesh could reach the wood below, before it gave away to nothing as if he hovered high above as a soon to be re-fallen angel dressed with wings.

Content to leave him hanging, only brute force blotted neck, leaving him stranded somewhere close between white and black; there were not a few rocks or sticks that struck to break his bones.

And then, in a moment, all his weight came vanished. His chains had finally been released, soaring through the air once free; even if he was only plummeting.

It was probably only seconds. It was more than enough time to ask the questions. When would his pleasant flight come to an end? When would the reeling rope reach its end? Would the fatal bungie prove his end? Or was it just another sufferance that would be cut short of end? To be regenerated as something worse beneath soon to be shattered bends?

Strangely enough it may have been the first time in his life the sullen images that plagued his mind had all but left; the deathly images that flitted by left blinded by unseeing eyes. As the screams grew louder with his fall he felt strangely cleansed. As if the sum of sins were being doled reverse unto their righteous roost. The shrieks grew louder…

—He felt no tug beyond his neck, but neither the creak of bloodied bone beneath his head. There was neither the silent splatter of murky glob upon his face nor the jutting of ivory shards from his quavering limbs.

A tiny voice whispered into his ear, small yet unmistakable, inescapable. As if he had forgotten. “I won’t forgive you if you go messing everything up now. You’ve got to live a happy life.”

More than just the words he felt as if he were being sucked in.

“Don’t you find it pathetic! How easily people are swayed?! How fickle they are to influence? Those tiny steering whispers in their ears appear so loud to them as to blot everything uncomforting and non-conforming; no matter what of reason’s tell. They allow their simple rationality to guide them to distrust so easily. So twisted…” They were like the words spoken from his heart—those he wished to scream. “The man you’re looking for wouldn’t be caught so easily. Nor would he have been as convenient a scapegoat to be shot and weakened; silent to be caught.”

At the same time they were not all.

“People are fickle, but at least they can believe. They can think and they can rationalize. They can trust. For every person there is a different reason. …That is beauty enough itself.”

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Wake Up

Someone was knocking at the door. How long had she been out, she couldn’t tell. …Why had she even come into this room? It was empty with no one else.

“My lady, are you in there?!”

*Ah, that’s right…* A spark of annoyance roused her from her slumber.

She had come back after the war, if you could even call it one of sorts. It had all ended so quickly. She had been reunited with a friend and freed from her shackles. She had regrets sure, but who didn’t and when the time came though some chose to abandon her, the most important returned to stay. *Though I suppose I should get up to let her in… Such a shame.* It’d been a long time since she’d rested so well.

The door split down along the edges. Elsenlied must have heard the muffling and thought for worst. “But was it really necessary to break down the lock?”

“There you are! When you didn’t appear in time for leaving? Everyone was quite panicked.”

“Yes, I can see you panicking,” *and it is quite the sight.* “Are we too late to go?”

“Don’t worry we’ve had a substitute stand in place.”

“Shouldn’t that have been you? You have been promoted to captain of the order.” *This girl…to think she would abandon her duties as soon as this.*

“I couldn’t have left this to anyone else.” At least she was adamant. “Still, why are you here?”

“Why am I here?” She had come here herself, by her own will. Why it had even slipped her mind a moment she couldn’t tell, but that thing inside her told her it hadn’t been for naught. “That’s right…” there was a shadow. “There should have been someone else; someone important that I had to confront. Always telling orders that seemed like mine, sneaking into my mind. Someone close. Someone familiar.” …Was there anyone like that?

“Feena?”

There was something sitting on the table. Something white and lucid like the topmost layer of peeled skin pulled from one’s face; without a hint of the red from her dress.

She had a headache, an unbelievable headache, like something had been taken and gone missing. “Never mind if you don’t remember. But there is something I’d like to see with my own eyes.”

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Abyss

“So this is the place right.” There they were in the blackness pitched of countless stars. Only one of them had ever been, but both knew it was there. Though he had never seen it, Hezran he had felt it there, at the joining of the breach. As she had known it so did he.

“Yes.” That was all she needed to say, the very first word to ever leave her mouth.

“It’s a lovely voice.” Partial though he was, the sound slipped like twinkling bells between his ears, like that lullaby she’d sung…so long ago from now it seems.

“I’m happy. It’s the first chance I’ve got at forming words, the first time since my balance seemed to have taken a turn.” Before then the other voices had always been stronger. They wouldn’t forgive the twisted darkness, present in every inch of soul, more apparent in the human hands that dyed them. Even as they sunk deep themselves. Her precursors lasting shine pervaded light, even from the pit, precisely from the pit. “—you already knew this though.” Though considering the time that had passed perhaps more simple cause was to blame.

“By the way, it seems we’re not alone.”

“And so it seems. It’s the same as before.”

It wasn’t the first. That glowing figure melding in the dark; meddling from the darkness. It wasn’t worry enough at time, but now… A constant fixture of this…place…?

“Perhaps you best think it a box: one of infinite points matching time with place with person with thing with state. The edges and lines you see are of your current selves; for most they only trace the surface of their bodies. Your radius defined; how far your touch can reach beyond your current mode.” Nothing could be seen. No tap of heel, no sleights of hands, no flapping of gums…nothing of the sort. It was a thing that seemed to have no form.

As if the space wasn’t mysterious enough on its own.

“It’s truly amazing. All the more so for those of us who can touch beyond” An inking line spread out, this one blacker than the black. It cut the space between their hands, still no higher than their feet. “But also dangerous.”

Sinister irons snaked about unclenched hands. Chains of black flame, they itched and they burned, and yet they felt so cold. Were they an illusion of their minds, or a reflection of another’s heart?

“What do you think it would take if someone were to be lost in the folds of time and space? If two were to be separated across points of stars, to places they never knew, and should never have known, without a light to guide their way?” Even muffled and muddling, the voice seemed strangely sad.

The line between, the wavering wall, grew thicker and higher. Artificial, dull, a fake boundary none the less solid in this scape. Each felt an opposing tug as links appeared from collar one-by-one, chaining them to invisible points of fates, chains dragging themselves inwards and pulling their catch along.

“Don’t let go!”

“I won’t!”

They were going to be separated, divided from themselves, from their long fought home and hope. Even now, their palms been pulled undone, only the fragile twining of fingers held them from apart.

“People think they care, they think they love; they think they know. But they don’t always understand.”

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Prologue End

“I am only getting started.”

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