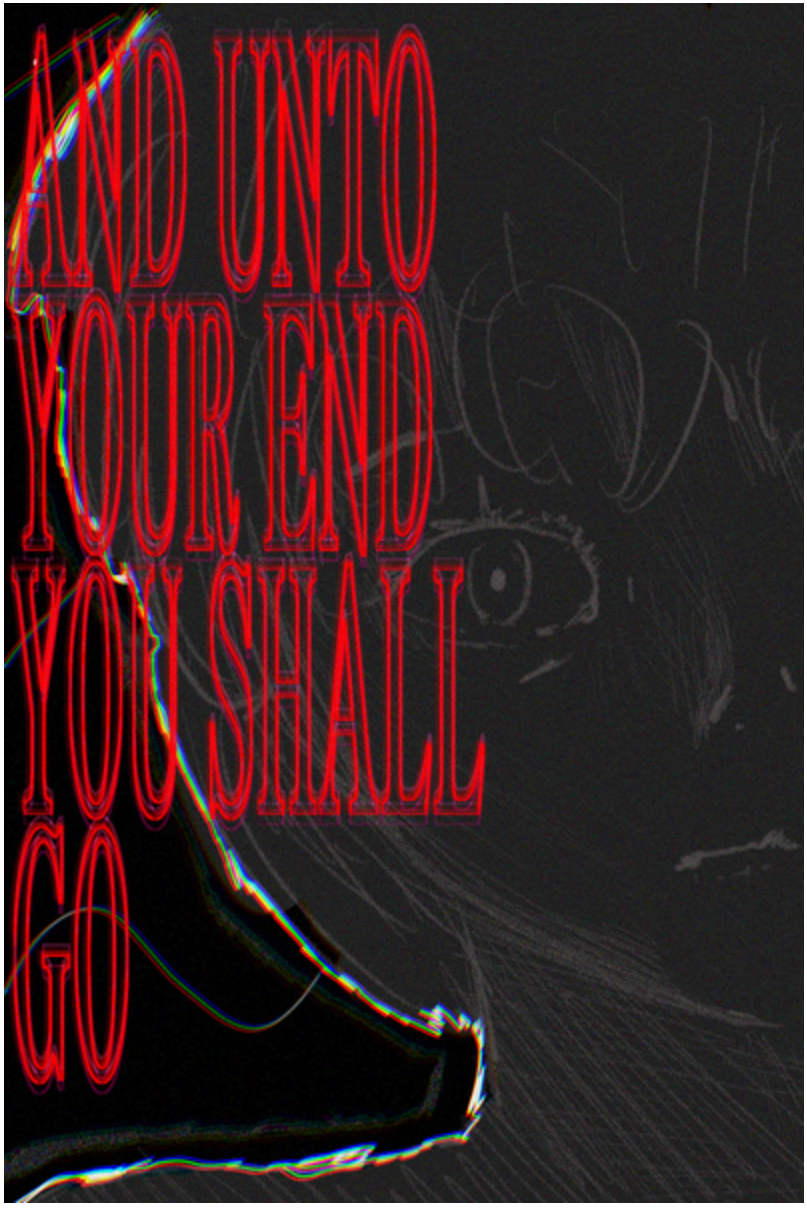
AND UNTO
YOUR END
YOU SHALL
GO

And Unto Your End You Shall Go

claire e k

Wayfarer is estranged from life and love. Transported into the world of a Discord roleplay server, he must make sacrifices to grow and save—save what? Save the world, or maybe himself. Wayfarer is estranged from life and love.

Categories: Gen

StellarStardust's avatar was drawn by kiikiibee on tumblr.

Read the AI disclosure

cekillinger.com/books/and-unto-your-end/

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001 / fantasia enter

I seemed to be drowning.

My vision was blurry. It had happened before. Everything, all had—

I lay in a shallow pool that stretched infinitely outward. A silhouette stood at the horizon and her hair fell thickly in damp coils around her neck; her posture was shambling and she shifted forward, and she clutched at her arm, which was wounded.

My hair spread out around me.

I was conscious of it—

I seemed to be drowning.

I spent most days online. Outside of school and work (both of which I really hated) that was the only thing I did. I didn't write, that was for sure, and I didn't draw, either. I had fallen off of both of those. They used to be interests of mine. That's life, though, isn't it? C'est la vie.

Uh, rather, I spent my time on this chat app called Discord. And I didn't just spend 'some' of my time, to be clear, I spent a lot, *most* of it!

Like, to put it into perspective... if I spent four hours a day on schoolwork, and I spent five hours every other day working, that left fourteen or nine hours, every other waking moment of my day, to be spent online. I barely ate, I barely slept, so that I could have more time to spend on the internet.

I guess you could even say I was addicted. I was addicted to spending time with people online. Talking and talking and talking, heedless of all the hours melting away. I spent so much time addicted to their 'presences.'

But I didn't think of it like that... they were my friends, you know?

... Well, I suppose I haven't introduced them.

There was Stellar, who was really sweet, for a really long time, before it fell apart. She loved magic.

(And, um... Stellar wasn't really a girl, in fact Stellar was a guy, and, uh, rather open about that? but we all called her her, because it was habit, and she was fine with it. So roll with it, I think.)

There was Quartz, who was a lot like me, but in a way that made it so that when we disagreed it hurt a lot more than it would have otherwise. Or, for the most part, it didn't hurt, but it was annoying...

There was, well, there were a lot of people, but those two are the relevant ones. Those two were the ones who were online the day I woke up in a world of fantasy and magic.

Anyway, I said hi.

Discord has a sidebar, a section of the UI where you can see who's online in a given server. Unless you manually change your status to invisible, when you're online you appear on this sidebar. There were three names marked as online in the co-owner section of the server at the moment.

Me, Stellar, Quartz. You understand, right? I'm telling you about them so that you understand.



Quartz
yo

His avatar was a piece of art from Homestuck. I didn't really recognize it, I hadn't read Homestuck, but it made for a distinctive avatar. He never really changed it, so it was immortalized as 'Quartz' in my mind.

(with regards to reading Homestuck, I had promised him I would, but I never had.)



tzutzutzu
what's up?



Quartz
I had an idea I wanted to float to you

For the event (the Christmas event (I don't know what other event it'd be but just so you know it's the Christmas event (Have you read Homestuck yet)))



tzutzutzu
oh

yeah, for sure

let me check backlogs first, we can do this in DMs

not reading homestuck anytime soon btw

Every day, when I woke up, the first thing I'd do would be to read all of the server backlogs. I didn't want to miss anything. The people in this fake world were my only friends, and my real friends.

It didn't matter to me how immaterial this reality was. My parents had always talked about stuff like online safety, and that people you meet online aren't real people. But they were real to me? Even if everyone was lying about who they were, they had still constructed these identities, and those identities were who I had fallen in love with.



Quartz
Sure sure

Click. I scrolled through channel after channel, catching-up on the happenings of the server. I tried to wake up early and go to bed late so I was on all the time. I think that stopping conflicts quickly is pretty essential to moderation of a server that's meant to go on for a while.

And it was sort of lonely, reading the backlog, and that was another reason why I tried not to sleep too much.

I had gotten some DMs from my friends in my absence, various ones, but Stellar was the only other active co-owner, so I clicked hers first. Stellar and I didn't talk very much in private.



StellarStardust
heyyyy

She'd sent that message several hours ago, while I was asleep. It wasn't often I got weird messages only saying 'hi' or 'hello' from anyone who wasn't a scammer.



tzutzutzu

what's up?



StellarStardust

So there's this quiz



tzutzutzu

yeah?



StellarStardust

7 sent me it and told me to take it

You might want to look at it? I don't know but it definitely seems up your alley



tzutzutzu

yeah, sure

—I was about to ask Stellar to send the quiz, but immediately after I said that it appeared on the screen. She had uploaded it instantly after posting, then. That or her internet connection was really fast?

LABYRINTH QUIZ read the name of the executable.

LABYRINTH ...

I haven't really explained everything.

Me, Stellar, Quartz were the three co-owners of this Discord server called Labyrinth Climbers. It was a roleplay server. People would write long text posts as their characters, and go on violent fantasy quests, and it was all backed with this homebrewed game system that put numbers to their actions.

It was sort of like—have you heard of *Westmarches?* It's a Dungeons and Dragons format. There's a lot of players, maybe 20, and they rotate in and out with each other on four-man or five-man or six-man or any-other-number-of-man quests inside of one big shared world. They're usually great fun.

(My issue with Westmarches campaigns was how the sort of ultimate transience of everything besides your own character left them feeling oriented very inwardly. I felt this about Labyrinth Climbers, too.)

Yeah ... I didn't draw or write, but I did roleplay.

LABYRINTH QUIZ—it loaded. A CYOA appeared—Choose Your Own Adventure. A pop quiz to determine your powers and abilities.

> **Labyrinth Quiz**
>
> Welcome, WAYFARER.
>
> You have been chosen, by the grace of Holy God and all Gears, to change this world. To shape it—build its roads—erect its monuments—level its cities. WAYFARER, you must collect your harem of seventy-two pure virgins. Vestals will be sacrificed promptly.

I scrolled down, falling deeper into the CYOA.

> WAYFARER, take this beginning...
>
> **SELECT YOUR TRAITS.**
>
> **0/72**
>
> **Meta Traits**

Butterflies (18)

Slows plot divergence increasingly until the Sundered King.

Rise To Power (18)

Guarantees an opportunity to ally with a powerful character or to become strong as a lone wolf. Does not guarantee the power itself.

Narrative Armor (24)

Moments in which you would die more often turn out to be nonlethal. However, injury is more common, and bad things happening by chance will occur more often to you were the plot judged "better."

Deus ex Machina (36)

Once in a moment of guaranteed defeat, the plot will literally shift around you to instead turn it into a moment of full victory. Happens once.



tzutzutzu

alright! yeah

…it has more personality than i expected

ahaha.



StellarStardust

From 7? Yeah



tzutzutzu

he's not, like, *that*…



StellarStardust

No he is I can tell from your reaction :)



tzutzutzu

…yeah. yeah



StellarStardust

So what do you think?



tzutzutzu

well, i do hav ea few questions! this is just between you and me so i'll ask for your interpretation of them, i guess?



StellarStardust

Hit me



tzutzutzu

first of all, as i understand it this is meant to be a, like---CYOA into the beginning of Labyrinth Climbers, like, when the plot began?



StellarStardust

Mhm! The ant fight, remember?



tzutzutzu

yeah i remember

cool… i have confirmation on what butterflies does then at least thats good to know

narrative armor. who does the passive-voice judging here?



StellarStardust

Well I assume there's some sort of impartial third party that does? like a judge or something. A rules lawyer lol



tzutzutzu

haven't you ever felt like impartial is a bit of a silly descriptor?



StellarStardust

The way people mean impartial isn't "doesn't take sides," I think… it's like, you can give the same situation to the impartial judge with any array of people and it'll always spit out the same answer, no matter who

no like



tzutzutzu

factional loyalty



StellarStardust

factionali—Yeah

Well I think you're overthinking it and making it complicated when it doesn't need to be

Just make an assumption and a choice



tzutzutzu

yeah

okay

there's more. let me read

Physical Traits

Bloodforged (18)

Start with a trait of your choice.

Custom Attribute (18)

Start with one of the canonical unique magic attributes of the server.

King Arthur (24)

Start with a powerful S-Tier Artifact.

Double/Prodigious Ability (36)

Gain a second ability, or have one ability start at Level 20.



tzutzutzu

these SUCK



StellarStardust

Well that's not true



tzutzutzu

the issue is like

compared to the Meta Traits these are all things you can grind for yourself in the context of the server? like its not hard to get an artifact lol



StellarStardust

If you're high level



tzutzutzu

you just have to get there



StellarStardust

But realistically speaking, in LC, you would die. Before you got there. Like the world isn't not lethal

Lol



tzutzutzu

that like depends on a lot of stuff!

like take the metaphysics

theres a notion of "plot divergence" here in like butterflies right? if there's a plot to diverge from that implies there's some sort of… i don't know, like, route? force? that guides what happens

and this is plot. as opposed to just atoms bumping into each other, which is how our own world works. and this force of plot doesn't exist in our world, because our world is clearly reducible

like a plane is reducible down to a wing down to plates down to elements down to like atoms or whatever etc



StellarStardust

Uh



tzutzutzu

and so for the meta traits they affect something metaphysical, above the material world, something to do with how reality works



StellarStardust

STPO OVERTHINKING THIS



tzutzutzu

it's like you said

realistically, i'd die, right?

Mental Traits

Historian (18)

You have perfect recall of information.

Truthseeker (18)

You can't be lied to.

Coldhearted (24)

You're less susceptible to onslaughts of emotion in general, and in heated situations act logically. Pain has a dulled effect on you.

Unbreakable (36)

You cannot be reduced to inoperability mentally.



StellarStardust

Yeah



tzutzutzu

historian is really good

really really good



StellarStardust

I think Truthseeker is better for 18 cost



tzutzutzu

i can use historian for like

red truths and stuff idk trust me bro…

i like it more i guess, i don't want to forget anything haha

okay, my choices are unbreakable, historian, butterflies



StellarStardust

Why so?



tzutzutzu

unbreakable for obvious reasons

i'm not a character in a story and any amount of absolute defense even if its just mental is the best type of effect in the game. butterflies and historian synergize so the plot remains predictable and i can use historian to manipulate it to my advantage



StellarStardust

Lots of passive utility abilities instead of really active picks



tzutzutzu

they're better

safer



StellarStardust

I'll tell 7 what you said about it!



tzutzutzu

you that

there's still some left to go

I scrolled down. The page darkened. No text appeared. I scrolled down, and down, until all I was doing was futilely spinning the

wheel of the mouse, down, down, down, until finally—text appeared.

> Then, WAYFARER...

It appeared on the screen. Just that line! But I felt something within me stir. Something great and cthonic. I didn't understand what it was, at the time; all I knew was that suddenly it had all become so much more serious...

> All is made, and selected.
>
> ALL is CONFIRMED.
>
> WAYFARER, go into this world...

And unto your end you shall go.

The lights were suddenly bright, my clothes were suddenly caught by the wind. That was enough to make me stumble back from my computer. Go into this world, and unto your end you shall go? What did that...

Enormity opened up before me, and I felt sick, suddenly—

"If you were allowed to leave this world, what would you do?"

I had asked that, once, to Quartz.

"Leave this world?"

"If you got to have an isekai adventure," I said.

We sat, for a long silence, and the gold-black paint molten and magmatic dripped from slathered position on the walls abstract.

"I probably wouldn't do anything," said Quartz. "Not unless I was changed somehow, too..."

"...?"

I imagined that Quartz looked at me, then.

"You know."

The lights were bright, until they weren't, and I woke up to the sounds of the cicadas chirping. My hands, face, body, they were all sticky, red; they all smelled of iron. My stomach turned as I

realized I was lying spreadeagled in a deep, shining pool of blood, a pool of blood visible in the warm light of torches.

I scrabbled, pushed myself around in the tacky mess. I was covered in it; it seeped through my fingers, coated my skin; ran down in rivulets from my forehead to my eyelids to my eyes themselves, where they pooled around, coloring my vision, and I tried to wipe my hands on my clothing—a single-color yellow shirt and sweatpants—but that was stained too! Already red, everything red, red to the end of it all...

I breathed, heavily—no, I hyperventilated, rapidly, in—out—in—out and it was all I could do to try and control my breathing. "Oh god. Oh god. What—what?"

What's happening?

That was all I could think, you know? I was... boggled! In complete disbelief, shock, and denial at the situation. I couldn't comprehend that I had been sitting at my computer moments before, couldn't comprehend the smell, taste, feel of that much blood around me.

Maybe that was why I didn't see it coming until it was too late.

The cicadas stopped chirping.

Something wicked this way came.

Metal bit into my side, tore chunks of flesh from my body, gleaming silver-stained-red swept up and as I tumbled it lanced right down again, swiftly closing the distance, rushing to bisect me, guillotine me, sever my head by the neck—I barely managed to scramble out of the way. Whatever it was (an axe?) slammed into the ground; splinters of wood exploded outward as its

bearer, a mounted form, cloaked, dragged it up and out of the floor.

I looked around, frantically, never mind the slicing pain in my side. We were on a sort of circular, raised, wooden dais. Red blood stained the wood, covered it all up in crimson. Around the dais, behind me, ahead of me, all around, lined up radiating outward from its center, were corpses. Staked through the heart of each corpse was a torch.

The rider ahead of me slowed his mount, a horse, to a canter. I could see him clearer, now, in the light of the torches around the dais. It wasn't an axe that he carried; rather gripped by languorous hands was a long polearm, with three heads: an axe blade, spike, and hook. That is, it was a halberd.

"H-hey," I said, fighting through the pain in my side.

Silence stretched out; the rider regarded me.

I could feel the pressure mounting. I only had one chance. I had to make it count. What should I say? I need to talk him down. Or maybe escape into the forest. Maybe he wouldn't be able to pursue me on his horse, in the forest. But every second I waste here... gah...!

I steeled myself, pulled a breath in, looked balefully at the rider.

"S—" I choked on myself.

"Stop," I said, or tried to say—I couldn't hear my own voice. No, I don't mean figuratively. I mean literally—I was rendered mute.

"Here's to the king," said the rider, and his voice was so loud, so audible...!

It rushed at me. But seven or several more circumscribed seals appeared in the air before me, demon-writing crests inflamed, impassioned—they exploded outward, white sparks quickly changing shapes, swirling mixing and knotting together to form a long branch of crystal, organic and twisting—the rider's halberd slammed violently into the crystal, yellow sparks exploded outward, and it bounced back—the crystal was unharmed.

I barely resisted the urge to look around for whoever or whatever my savior was—I didn't have time for stuff like that. So I began to limp, clutching my side. Blood spilled out onto the dais, fresher, redder blood, as, shaking, I took a step down. If I could just escape into the forest, I'd have a much better chance. I could be saved, if I escaped into the forest...!

The crystal shield behind me gave me some time. He'd have to run around, and by that point, I'd be in the forest, wouldn't I? I'd have to be, wouldn't I? I limped, slowly, surely, wincing and grunting and bleeding; red trickled down my leg and I almost fell, it hurt so much.

The lights behind me dimmed.

What...?

I turned around, slowly, in slow-motion adrenaline-induced state I saw above me a shadow.

I saw above me hooves, legs, and a gleaming silver-stained-red streak.

The rider's horse had leapt over the crystal branch.

It hit the ground, turned in a circle, and swung the halberd once more.

"Fancy trick! Glint of the light!"

I dropped to the ground, almost confident I had evaded the halberd strike as the rider passed by me without hitting—before another arm extended from the rider's cloaked form, and cut a long line from earth up all the way to soaring heaven above. Blood exploded out of my shoulder; patterned the ground and the horse, and I choked.

The rider rotated, faced me, raised his halberd high—

And the head of the axe slammed into the earth. Up and out the rider pulled it, up and out clods and sprays of dirt came, mingling with the blood on my skin, caking my prone body. I stared upward, dimly conscious I was even alive.

Fancy trick. Glint of the light. Who said that?

The three-armed rider swept his billowing cloak around him as he marched in a circle around the dais. The dread horse whickered as the rider turned his head this way and that, searching.

"A sacrificial lamb...? Injured thing."

A woman's voice. Or maybe a girl's, light and airy. Different from the voice I'd heard before, which was certainly a man's. A soft, palliative hand rested itself on my shoulder. I resisted the urge to cough, or make any noise at all. All I could do was bleed into the unkind grass—

"Falida and all her friends are here, now. There's no reason to be afraid ... Can you pick yourself up?"

I was dizzy; the monochrome world was fading slowly into light. I tried to pick myself up, tensed my body, tried so hard—but I

collapsed anyway. The feeling of the hand on my body disappeared.

"Help me," I said. "Help me. Please help me."

"Rest," said the woman's voice. "Rest."

Deep, obscure crystal crept over me. I struggled, twisting my body, pulling it, struggled harder than I'd ever struggled in my life. It was useless, though. All useless.

My eye was the last thing the opaque crystal covered.

002 / crystal thus choreographed

When the crystal began to melt off my body, and I regained consciousness, the first thing I asked myself was to review what had happened. It was fact that I had done that quiz, and then I'd woken up here, right? That didn't...

It didn't make sense. It wasn't a thing that happened in *reality*—people weren't just spontaneously transported to another world, and Choose Your Own Adventure sheets weren't things with powers like that. Your friends online just *didn't have* powers like that!

But the fact remained that what I could see in front of me now, perceive, feel, all of it lined up, right? It was all, totally, entirely as if I had been transported to a new world.

My body ached, and that felt real enough.

I decided to run through some possibilities. *Possibility one. This is all happening, as straightforwardly as possible. I really just got transported into another place that's as real as our current one. Possibility two. I'm hallucinating or delusional somehow? Or my perception of the world is otherwise compromised.*

The issue with possibility two was that if my perception of the world couldn't be trusted, nothing could. Like, if my brain was being hacked into or something, by evil ultra-illicit information magic, I wouldn't be able to tell at all! A classic Cartesian demon. ...So it was a no-go.

Possibility three. My memories of the CYOA sequence are wrong.

I paused my train of thought. Was I being hasty? I worried so. There was no reason to believe this place was...

I tried to suck a breath in. Melting crystal fell into my mouth, and I choked, coughed—I made noise. Too much of it.

"Falida says: 'the child is awake'...!"

"Let's see, eh?"

That was him! The voice, the one that said fancy trick.

There was the soft crunching of leaves, and the world darkened as a shadow fell over me, blocking out the orange light of—a campfire?

A man, dropping to his haunches, suddenly took up my field of view. Grizzled, a scar ran across his aquiline nose; he had a wiry body, a tough build, and wore plates of armor with a robe underneath, or maybe a robe plated with metal.

"Hey, kid."

"Pleashe don't," I hacked, coughed more of the gunky gem-stuff up, "kill me,"

"Depends. What's your allegiance to?"

I froze. There was a dilemma. The issue was that if I was honest and said I was teleported here from another world, he wouldn't believe me, right? And I couldn't just say no allegiance, obviously, because he'd kill me. He'd assume I was trying to hide my true allegiance.

Think. Think, think think think think think. There's something I can say here to get out. I know there is. There has to be.

I could guess. Yeah. Yeah!—I could try and guess at what factions there were here. I got here by taking LABYRINTH QUIZ, right? *Maybe it's not far fetched to name a faction from the Labyrinth? Maybe it's like, it's like* anime! *An isekai into some work that's particularly meaningful to me! But it's a, a stupid*—even now the concept makes me wince just thinking about it—*Discord roleplay server*. It was, you know, slop... I had always considered myself someone who preferred, er, higher art. That sounds obnoxious, and... well, I guess it is just straightforwardly obnoxious, isn't it?

Maybe it was like anime. I shifted my eyes away, conscious it looked like I was stalling, but it was okay, I was making headway on thought. I couldn't stop thinking; suspension of thought was a clogged barrel.

There were a couple of factions in the server, some player-created. I'd rule those out. There was no way to know anything about what was going on for sure right now, not like this, and for now I'd constrain my guesses to the most likely possibilities. That left, early on, only the side of the Clockwork Revolution, the 'good guys,' and the side of Sunder, the 'bad guys.' Sunder.

The Sundered King was the big bad of the first arc of the server. But LABYRINTH QUIZ had made it seem like that was what it was building to as this massive conclusion. The final boss, in a sense, rather than the end of the tutorial?

"Here's to the king." Remember that? What the rider said before. "Here's to the king." If these guys, the woman and man and whoever Falida was (or maybe Falida was the woman speaking in third person?), were fighting the rider, then they had to be ... these guys had to be...

"I'm with Clockwork," I blurted, the gem-stuff having nearly dissolved from my mouth, though its entrapment had not yet released my body. "Not the Sundered King. Never him."

The words had to mean something, right? I mean, it would be silly to totally disregard the fact that I had only appeared here because of a Labyrinth Climbers-themed quiz—and yet—

"Mmm. Ya sure about that?" said the man.

At once I felt some relief, because the words meant something, but I tensed up, too, because he was asking me if I meant it.

What could I do. What could I do. I needed to stop *over*thinking. I was doing that too much.

"Yeah," I said. "Y-yeah, I'm sure," I said, as confidently as I could.

"Eheh," said the man. "What was the sacrifice?"

"What?"

"The blood," the man gestured, vaguely, to the sheen that covered me.

I sucked a breath in. "I..."

I didn't know how to explain, because I didn't know what a good explanation would be. *I just woke up here?* Hah, don't make me laugh... I knew that I was suspicious. A beat passed, in which we looked at each other, before he stood up, towered above me. I was still encased in my crystal coffin.

"Kid," said the man. "Ya can't just play dumb with us."

"Falida doesn't smell the stink on him," said the woman's voice. She was still a silhouette in the background, lit by the fire.

"The sacrifice," said the man.

"Wellll... Falida doesn't smell the stink..."

I wanted to ask who Falida was, but for fear of being hurt badly I didn't. The stink? Was it maybe an indicator of allegiance to Sunder?

I noticed, as well, when I shifted my body, that though it ached, I didn't seem to have any holes in me. I stayed quiet about this, as well. I didn't want to trigger anything...

The man grunted. I closed my eyes; he threw his arms down, smacked his legs, stood up.

"Welp! Today's your lucky day, kid. You get to live. Thanks for being cooperative and all," he said, louder, for no reason. I'd heard him...

"Okay," I said, "thank you," I said.

"I'm Rudolf. This is Petra." (He motioned, to the woman.) "And Falida is..."

"Oh! Yes, Falida is around you," Petra said.

I tried to move my arms and legs, and though there was resistance, I was able to drag them through the gem gel.

"Umm, Falida says not to move," Petra said. "She will retract herself, by herself..."

"So I should let it dissolve...?"

"Falida is a *her*," Petra said.

I returned my head to its resting position, and stared upward into the black sky. Firelight hit the tips of the trees, tickled their branches. I exhaled.

Tentatively: "Can I ask questions?"

"Falida permits it..."

"How many?"

"—*Well,* as many as Falida ultimately permits."

"Falida's your leader, right?"

Rudolf turned, looked down at me, straightened his robes. "Petra's. My leader is Sergeant Wienlie. A good man ..."

"Yes, I am bound to serve Falida," Petra addressed me directly. "She's my mistress. I am wedded to her forever and ever..."

"What *is* Falida?"

"Falida is a rock-man! Don't you know? Stone and quartz..." Petra shook her head at me, disapproving, or maybe playing—but with her odd affect, I couldn't tell whether or not she was being serious.

Rock-man. I made a mental note of that. It wasn't something that I recognized from the original roleplay server... unless. Was it the case that whatever created this world (or, I supposed, created my memories?) could change things in the server? Change the names of things?

There was this playable species that was, uh, well. I had ripped off this manga I had read once, Land of the Lustrous, which I really liked! So I imitated its aesthetic. I named the race Houseki, Japanese for 'gem,' because *of course* it was Japanese

—it was a Discord roleplay server (places like that were and are weeb attractants). This species had the ability to replace parts of themselves with metal and other gems, and were immortal, and had to be shattered to be defeated.

Was Falida a Houseki? Were rock-men, as Petra called them, Houseki?

"I see," I said. "Rud—"

"Falida says no more questions," interrupted Petra. "She's really tired of hearing it! You annoyed her too much!"

"H-ho—" I began, stopped: "That was literally only two questions, wasn't it??"

"Ummm, that's a question too! Don't annoy Falida anymore..."

"Okay," I said. "I won't. ... Does it count if the question is for Rudolf?"

Petra looked voicelessly at me. I supposed it did.

"That's enough," said Rudolf. He bent down, extended a hand toward me. I remained motionless on the ground, thinking for a second, and he forcefully grabbed my arm, and hauled me out of the green gel, which splattered on the black forest floor below.

"Next time, take my hand without me having to haul you up myself," he said.

I looked at him, and my eyes traced the outline of his screwed-up face, and I nodded.

"Eheh. We have to meet up with Wienlie and the others. Falida really doesn't smell anything?"

"Falida says the stench of heresy on his body *remains* minimal," replied Petra. Rudolf looked at her really hard. She smiled. "Teha, umm, so says Falida... don't look at me so."

I incised into the conversation. "... Can I come with you guys? I- I can pull my own weight. I can try, anyway. I can't promise I'll be—"

"Well, Falida *knows* you won't be useful," said Petra mildly. "Falida *is* a gracious mistress, though ... and the clockwork revolution's ideals of a picture-perfect printed existence for everyone extend and apply to you as well. Rudolf, what do you think?"

A few seconds passed. He regarded me. Finally Rudolf snorted. "... Yeah. ... Yeah, you can come, kid. But reconnecting is hard. Prepare to stretch yourself thin."

Better than dying, I supposed. I nodded.

The fire in the center of our camp wasn't a fire at all. Rather, it was a carved lump of crystal, pulsing white-orange, with an intense heat radiating off its smooth surface.

"It's Falida," said Petra. "Are you pleased by her appearance?"

"Um, I suppose," I said. I wasn't really sure how I should respond to that. Falida was kind of just a rock...

"... Falida thinks that answer is *totally* phoned-in..." said Petra.

Time ticked by at the speed of a generation. I watched light flicker inside Falida.

"Was Falida the crystal branch that saved me?" I asked, finally. "With the rider. It blocked its halberd attack. That would've killed me."

"Falida was indeed," said Petra. "Falida has an incredible sense of justice, of action, of necessity ... and is a righteous woman, you know! She looked at you, and saw that you had no fundamental opposition to the things she is composed of. Falida feels..."

I studied Petra. Her eyes were closed, and she listed off with a smile all these things, all these descriptions of what Falida was, as we stood over the crystal that was our campfire. I didn't have a great sense of who Petra was, outside of a mouthpiece for Falida. It was maybe slightly aggravating, in a way... I'm the sort of person that enjoys knowing what makes people tick. But Petra had subordinated herself to Falida in a way that made her hard to see right.

"Heh, Falida feels a not-insignificant amount of pity and affection for creatures such as we," said Petra. "In the scale of Falida's life, you and I are like... damselflies!"

That was another point for the houseki theory. The race was immensely long-lived.

"That's kind of a cliche," I said. "You could work on it by choosing something that kicks the eyeballs more... like, um, the pygmy goby, which is a centimeter-long fish. It, uh, lives for less than two months on average." I raised a finger myself, recited trivia from my head. That's right, I remembered that. I was sort of proud. Unless it was an effect of Historian? (My memory had always been bad, and I wouldn't have normally been able to recall something like that.)

Petra looked at me.

"... Falida wants to know where you're from, and what your name is."

"I..."

I looked at my hands, which were clean. Cleansed of the blood and dirt from before... spending time inside of Falida had cleansed and healed me.

"I don't know," I said. "I woke up in a pool of blood, in the woods, and I barely remember everything about this world. I didn't recognize what a 'rock-man' was. And immediately after, I got attacked by the rider, and then saved by you, Falida, and Rudolf."

"Your name, child?"

I looked away.

What was I? I was the ... same boy from the world I came from. But it didn't feel right to, somehow, ... to say. Well, maybe I didn't want to be the same person from the world before? For now, I had a purpose, and a title, didn't I? I was given it, by the quiz.

The quiz... which called me ...

"Wayfarer," I said. "Call me Wayfarer, just for now."

003 / magnetic, love you!

What did he *mean* by that? What did Rudolf *mean* by 'reconnecting is hard'?—that was the first question. I had more, but that was the thing I wanted to get an answer to most right now. And Sergeant Wienlie—I didn't remember anyone with that name. Wienlie, Wienlie ...

We can start with Sergeant. Sergeant was a city title, a military title. The good guys! So Wienlie had to be a soldier, like Rudolf, which I supposed made sense. It was a common trope, probably had some real world basis, I don't know, the... military network of respect, I guess. I guess. Falida, on the other hand, wasn't the sort of thing you'd see in the city military, and Petra didn't act like she was actually on the exact same side as Rudolf. Rather, it was the case that...

Well, it was more accurate to say that my *theory* was that this was a joint operation by the military and the adventurers.

The original roleplay server—Labyrinth Climbers—was much like traditional TTRPGs (if more anime-fantasy flavored) in that its plot and focus centered around the player characters going on adventures; of course taking quests and missions and getting into epic intrigue plotlines but broadly all of this was referred to as just going on adventures. It seemed like it wasn't too early to say that this world that I had found myself in was at least somewhat like that original server, so I felt kind of confident in the joint-operation theory, judging by the rules and tone of LC itself.

I could feel myself being pulled towards different lines of thought, theories, like—

1. How did the metaphysics of this world work? Was it 'like' a narrative, or a roleplay server, or was it 'mostly' materialist somehow excepting effects like Butterflies, or generally any of the other Meta Traits I had seen when I took the quiz?
2. What was the state of the world like? Was it exactly the same as in LC, same enemies and bad guys and good guys and magic and buildings and everything, but with … gaps filled? That would explain why I didn't recognize the term they used for Falida, because adding things as long as they were consistent with the original server would be fine in this reality. Or was it more like this world was just based on the original server, with omissions, edits, and changes according to the will of whoever or whatever made this place? That would be a lot more arbitrary, and it didn't appeal to my vision of beauty…

Well, if it was the former, the question opened itself up: how did the systems and rules of the original server affect this world?

Labyrinth Climbers was heavily systems-based. Most roleplay servers on Discord in the CRP—"combat roleplay"—sphere were, by the period in 2023 LC was made in—but LC was probably the most system-oriented server I'd ever participated in. That was why I liked it, the systems. Well… I guess it's not quite accurate to frame it like that. I didn't like it because I stumbled upon the systems. Really, I was the person who made and updated nearly every system in the server. I had made it in my image; it was my child.

The base system LC operated under was shoddy and broken, an artifact of a bygone era. It was everyone's first time running a server at that scale, so we didn't know how to do anything right. We were reluctant to make any large changes to it, any changes that weren't bandaid patches, because it would mean that the majority of characters would have to be fixed and checked over again—and that would mean, at its peak, dozens of people would have been submitting multiple characters each! A staff team with only four or five people pulling submissions duty would be overwhelmed, would burn out; we *did* burn out, and it would've been worse if we had made such massive changes to the system.

We simply would have had to have gotten it right the first time. That's why most roleplay servers don't survive past the two-month mark. The community or system or roleplay or something else sours; ninety five percent is culled out as chaff. Ninety five percent of roleplay servers don't survive past the two-month mark, and ninety five percent of the servers that do don't survive two years. You have to get it right, and then you have to keep getting it right, over and over.

LC was at the two and a half year mark. It hadn't gone under, but...

Anyway, the base system LC operated under just fundamentally didn't work well. There were seven stats: Power, Strength, Agility, Durability, Fortitude, Magic Skill, and Mana Wellspring. And they sucked.

A large part of this had to do with the minimum spread of stat points you had to make do with. Physically specced characters needed Power, Agility, Durability; Power was the stat for explosive speed and striking force, Agility for redirection, but

also reaction time, Durability was necessary to not hurt yourself moving at high power. Magic-oriented characters needed Magic Skill and Mana Wellspring; Magic Skill controlled damage and Mana Wellspring controlled output. But what was left for Strength and Fortitude?

Strength was a nearly useless stat. It controlled grip strength and other applications of "crushing strength;" i.e. non-explosive power, so as a result no one *seriously used* Strength. There were creative applications of it you could make, but the opportunity cost for not investing in Power, the better "direct force" stat, was too high.

You might think that Fortitude would be a useless mirror to Strength, but mental. You'd be wrong! Fortitude was easily the best stat in the server. It didn't fit into either physical or magical builds, but most strong characters still invested into it, and every strong character *attacked* it.

Fortitude represented the power of your mind. We didn't know what we were doing until very late on, so the rule of thumb in the server was that the special ability that every character had scaled to your Fortitude. Fortitude was one of the easiest stats to stack as a human on top of this, which most characters were, for various system reasons that I'll get to later, maybe.

Did you notice that for offense physical characters needed three stats and mages needed two? (Spells had their own drawback that balanced this out.) Fortitude-based characters could dump all of their points into Fortitude and dominate every fight that way. On top of being the strongest offensive stat, Fortitude was the most relevant defensive stat in high-level play, because it controlled your resistance to magic in line-of-sight based abilities like hexes.

Do you see the issue? It had the best high-level offense and defense in the server, all isolated to one stat.

That was what I was wondering, then, in this moment. Was this world like the server? Controlled by a hidden layer of stats? Were characters that had a certain build better than others in the same way, for the same systematic reasons, as in the server?

My eyes flicked to the side. Rudolf, Petra, and I had been creeping through the forest for the past thirty minutes. When we got going, Rudolf had given me his backup sword. I clutched it tightly in my hand.

"Who was that rider?" I whispered.

"An acolyte," said Rudolf.

"Of Sunder," I said, much more than I asked.

"He hates Falida because she's smart," said Petra.

"Smart?"

"Falida fit right in to the world of the Edict of Revolution… that's why she's not a creature of Sunder like the creatures in this forest," said Petra. She smiled a little bit.

Light from the moon filtered through the trees above. We all stopped; illuminated in the clearing before us was a hunched shape. Long, thin bones and spines were visible through cloth pulled tight over its body; where the cloth was tattered the thin, grey shine of metal came through. It bobbed, up and down, and seemed unaware of our presence.

Rudolf leveled his hands, extended a pointer finger from his left, cupped the rest of his hand, fingers curled, in his right, like he

was stabilizing a gun. And like he was aiming one he raised it.

"Don't say anything," he whispered, quiet as he could.

"Falida says that's a sincewraith," said Petra to me, helpfully, as quiet as always—which is to say, not quiet at all!

I looked at her.

The sincewraith stopped bobbing.

"We call them hunter drones in the city," said Rudolf. "Fuck, Petra," he pulled a breath in but whatever he said next was lost.

The sincewraith, or hunter drone, turned; its face was clad in a leathery mask, like a gas mask, but where the air filter should've been there was only teeth in circle array. Blood dripped from its maw.

It stood, tall, swayed; two feet taller than me at least and half as thin.

Rudolf's hand shook.

The sincewraith's head turned...

It stopped on Rudolf...

It stopped on Petra...

It stopped on Falida, carried on Petra's back...

And finally, it stopped at me. And that's where it settled! Wasn't that just awesome? I was the ordained isekai protagonist, after all; I was the chosen one, the special one; they would reel back in abject incomprehensibility when they saw me, and so of course I was the center of the prophecy, of course the sincewraith's glare would land on me—

Click. That's all I heard as the sincewraith's head tilted violently to the left, broken, off-kilter, offset; it rushed at me, raising a long rake-clawed hand high in the sky, preparing to send me to my end—Rudolf shouted, finally, "**Fancy trick, glint of the light!**"

His hand recoiled, shot upward, the sincewraith swayed but it brought down its claw nevertheless and that claw cut into my skin, cut straight into my arm—but it didn't go far, because the sincewraith's aim was off, no! It shaved skin and left a mark and I felt it draw blood but the sincewraith had attacked, fundamentally, a different direction, it didn't go far enough to kill, or even to hurt!

So that's what that did, I thought to myself, manic, maniacal, that's what that did! "**Fancy trick, glint of the light**" was an incantation!

This is what I was talking about before, the additional balancing factors for spellcasters. All spells required *incantations*. That was the *first* balancing factor we had ever added for mages, why agility didn't matter for them. They couldn't defend themselves anyway if a physical character rushed straight at them. They needed the time to say the words that would create their spell.

I stumbled backwards but I thought still. Back when I had been attacked by the rider Rudolf had saved me in the same way. Offset the rider's axe blow. More than that, he made the rider—I saw it now, I understood his ability—he made the rider believe it had killed me! The spell whose incantation was "Fancy trick, glint of the light" was an illusion spell, one that rotated the creature's perception of the world and caused them to believe they had hit!

—And that was why the sincewraith turned toward Falida; humming, gurgling, a deep and guttural but high and buzzing sound emanated from its boxy mask; what was it, even, what made sincewraiths? Hunter drone, sincewraith, what are you…? That wouldn't have been examined at all in the server! It wouldn't have been, but here…!

"Wayfarer, get away from it!"

Rudolf's shout brought me back to my senses. I turned tail, ran into the forest; light flashed behind me and then wind, a shockwave of force caught me, and threw me onto the ground. I expelled a grunt.

Noise no more. All the sounds ceased and everything abated except for Rudolf, breathing heavily.

I slowly picked myself up. I dragged my legs and my arms out of the mud, carefully lifted the sword from the ground, conscious that if I had fallen at the wrong angle I could have impaled myself on it. I needed to be more careful, I knew.

Dirt fell from the dense tangles of my hair.

And just as slowly as I stood I turned. I could feel it, couldn't I?

Something had gone terribly wrong.

Rudolf had told me to get away from it instead of casting a follow-up spell.

I knew… that's right, no, mounting terror, devastation, desolation—!

I knew that…!

Rudolf and Petra stood. Rudolf breathed heavily, hands on his legs. Petra was frozen in place, arms extended in a pushing motion.

In front of her was the sincewraith. A long spear of crystal stabbed it straight through the center of its chest—no, not a long spear! I saw, as I slowly began to walk forward, illuminated in the sanctified shine of the moon, glimmering fractals extending from the spear, extending in each and every direction but most pointedly burrowing directly into the sincewraith's torso and body, puncturing a thousand micro and macroscopic holes.

Its body shuddered. No. There was no terror nor devastation. Petra, Falida...

The beautiful body of Falida had grown all inside of it, obliterating all its insides. I could say without a doubt that whatever organs were inside had been turned completely to mulch.

Blood pooled around its feet, ran down its legs and body in rivulets; lit in the white light of the moon it shuddered. Falida greedily drunk up its blood, but there was too much for her to consume entirely.

The long, thin fractals of Falida ran from the front of the sincewraith to Petra's hands where they pierced through the skin and so too drained their color. Petra wobbled on her feet.

Slowly, the scene came into motion again. Falida's crystals began to dissipate as Petra drew her entirely out of the chest of the sincewraith; with swaying motions Petra collected all of Falida, collected her into a small orb, connected, draining, parasitic, vampire! and then even quicker Petra tensed her

hands, and Falida dropped, disconnected, a crystal ball in the tightly-packed mud and moss of the forest floor.

I stepped forward, hesitant to disturb it all. The sincewraith remained standing.

"It's dead," said Rudolf.

"Is it...?" said Petra.

I stepped forward, again, and passed the sincewraith. I faced it, for a second, looked at its body inert but for the slight twitches of its head and arms. I could smell the blood in the air.

Rudolf slowly sucked a breath in. The tension fled, little by little...

"That was really amazing," I said. "That's a really strong spell, Rudolf," I said, suddenly, right after.

"... Thank you, kid," he said. "Let's try not to get into a confrontation in the next few minutes. I can't afford to use more than a few spells like that per fight."

Petra smiled wistfully.

I turned around on impulse, gripped the hilt of my blade in two hands, and slashed the sword to the side as fast as I could, and the sincewraith which had jolted forward stopped as it stepped past me.

Its claws reached tantalizing so so close to Petra, hovered at her nose. A drop of blood fell from one and colored her skin.

There was no blood on my sword. Had I missed?

Breathing heavily, I turned around.

The sincewraith, still in that overextended pose, caught in the action of running, stayed put like a wax statue.

Rudolf and Petra were silent.

A thin line of red visible in the moonlight slowly but suddenly showed itself on the sincewraith's body, running cleanly from right shoulder to left hip. And slowly... just as slowly, but far more surely, the top half of the sincewraith's body slid down the diagonal cut.

A clean and brutal severing.

Petra clapped.

"Congratulations!"

004 / c'est la vie

Half the sincewraith's corpse fell and flopped wetly on the ground. The other half tottered on unsteady legs, then fell too. It was dead. It had survived Falida's attack, if only just, but now it was certainly dead.

"Good... good instincts, kid," said Rudolf.

"Yeah," I said, holding the sword limply.

"Falida says congratulations," Petra said. "Falida says that was beautiful. Falida would like to offer you something..."

"Shut up, Petra," from Rudolf, "what could a hunter drone have been doing here...?"

I bent down to look at the thing's corpse. "What is a hunter drone, or, uh, sincewraith?"

It didn't have visible organs, but that could have just been Falida's attack, so thorough, reduced to pulp... its inside was a chunky, gelatinous mass of gore, with long, thin, easily-shattered-and-thus-shattered bones that reminded me most of birds; that's why I had been able to cut through so cleanly. Its leathery exterior seemed to be entirely around the face. The skin where I had attacked was soft like tissue paper.

"They come from the heart of the city," said Petra. "Underground. Like Falida herself. But they aren't part of the world of the Edict of Revolution..."

"What is the Edict of Revolution?" I asked.

"Falida questions how you don't know," said Petra. "It's the reason why this war began."

Why did we have to fight the Sundered King at all?

I remembered asking Quartz that, at one point. The creator of the server, Corvid, had long since gone, disappeared due to some of the stupid drama that always seemed to surround the friend group. We were left to pick up the pieces; Quartz was nominated as the owner, as the most 'neutral' feeling member of staff.

As far as we could tell, Corvid's worldbuilding on this point had been rather simple. The Sundered King was a creature of sheer odium. He hated all the other creatures that thought, everything sapient, and so he waged war on them.

I...

I really respected Corvid, at the time, but even still, now, after all of the had passed. Let's make that clear. I really, really looked up to him. He was charismatic, and seemed to know what he was talking about, and projected an aura of authority through Discord that was tangible. He was good, great, even, at rallying a team; he had accomplished so much bringing all of the original creators of LC together.

I really respected Corvid, and didn't think he could be wrong.

But I hated it.

I hated how infantile it felt to me. There was no grayness nor ambiguity; there was nothing complex about the matter at all. I

just really, really hated that the premise of the server was that you had to fight a guy who hated you for no reason.

C'est la vie. That's how it was, for better or worse. I didn't have the spine to vocalize how I felt about it, and so that's how it was.

The Edict of Revolution wasn't something that had ever been in the server. The Clockwork Revolution, itself, was glossed over. Maybe...

It was like an Enlightenment scenario? The Clockwork Revolution was like the Enlightenment. And Falida 'fit into its world' because Falida was a creature of sapience and intelligence? And the Sundered King, maybe, not sapient but like a virus, bacterial, driven by impulse, maybe he hated, opposed by his very nature...

It was too saccharine, too simple, too much like what Corvid had written.

"I don't," I said.

Rudolf moved over to where we had seen the sincewraith hunched.

"It was written by our father," said Petra, reverent. "For all the creatures in this world, it granted hope. This world is so grim, isn't it? Paint a picture-perfect pretty printed life for everyone... that is the heart of the Edict... give them all the knowledge to know what is right and what is wrong, and give them the power to choose the former over the latter."

"Like clockwork," I said.

"Yes..." said Petra.

"Petra," I said.

Petra's eyes moved from Falida on the ground to me, and she smiled, slightly, and licked her lips a little.

"Why do you serve Fali—"

"We need Falida," said Rudolf, urgently.

My head snapped to him and I hurried over. Petra followed behind me with Falida in her hands. Crimson crystal spread out in webbing; connected to Falida's palms by tiny fractal tubes.

I looked down at the thing Rudolf was bent over. A young guy, wearing similar armor to Rudolf (military?), cleanshaven, contorted on the ground—a pool of blood had spread around him and he was curled around a nasty stomach wound; I could see, in the moonlight...—

Suddenly I fell to the ground and retched. It was different seeing this sort of thing on a person. It was different seeing it on someone else. It was different, definite, seeing his gut splattered like that, blood and organs all splayed out for the world to see, murder definite, death definite, it was different, and I couldn't hold myself back. I retched.

"He ain't dead," said Rudolf. "He's not dead. Falida."

"Falida is trying," said Petra.

There was light and it illuminated my sharp knucklebones as my curled fists dug into the mud but I didn't care; vomit and bile splashed on the sides of my hands as finally stuff came out,

colored something but certainly shiny; certainly carrying a stench—

"Go quicker," said Rudolf. "He's not dying. We ain't letting that happen."

"Falida is trying," said Petra, voice highstrung.

"...—Stop puking your guts out," Rudolf said, suddenly, violently. I choked, coughed, because nothing more was coming up. But the taste of the bile lingered in my mouth. "He's a person... afford him respect."

"Falida is settling," said Petra, suddenly.

I heard Rudolf exhale. The noise in my ears began to recede.

"Yeah."

"Yeah?" I choked out.

"Eheh. Don't say anything," Rudolf said tonelessly.

My fists curled tighter. Sensation fled. I could barely see that my skin was white, but I knew it was, I knew all the blood had drained out, and I knew how pathetic I looked, suddenly falling ill the moment I saw someone else dying like that—but I didn't care, did I? No! It was human! Sympathetic, morally righteous, virtuous to feel that pain for someone else, to feel shock and horror, no matter how pathetic...

I twisted my head to meet Rudolf's eyes.

They were wild. No matter how calm or collected he seemed on the outside Rudolf was a wild man, screwed-up face, bearscar.

I felt my face twist, a little bit.

"G-got annoyed at the *kid* puking his guts out? Seeing a dying man for only the first time...?" I began slowly, stuttering. But the pace of my speech began to accelerate. A mocking tone became more prominent. "You know, two minutes ago you said thanks... I saved Petra's ass...?"

Rudolf was silent.

There was a world between the two of us and I was unsure what he would do.

He stood there, silent judgement piercing, pointillist.

I didn't have my sword—I had dropped it in the dirt when I fell—and I was suddenly conscious of it. That was. That was fine. It was all fine. I felt the muddy clods of dirt or dirty moss beneath my nails and that was enough. All Rudolf was was an illusion mage, right...

Rudolf turned around and walked several steps into the forest.

Moments passed. I slowly pulled myself up.

Was he okay? More specific. Was the boy that we had found, the boy injured by the sincewraith, was he okay? I couldn't look, so I elected to ask—

"P-Petra," I said. "What does 'Falida's settled' mean? Nothing bad, right?"

The corners of Petra's lips bent up in a cute V shape and she tilted her head and she smiled. "Falida's settled on top of him. That's what it means. It's not bad! Falida settled on top of you, too, remember?"

I released a breath, and I smiled, even with the whites of my teeth (maybe my smile looked a bit pained). Pulling my gaze bit-by-bit down to the floor, I saw the crimson surface of Falida pulsing with ephemeral and iridescent light. Beneath that...

The soldier lay in stasis. The crystal surrounding his wound was dense, red, in fact so red I couldn't see the wound itself.

"What's happening there?" I asked.

"Falida is using his blood, and the blood she absorbed from the sincewraith, to attempt to heal him," Petra explained. "Falida says this wound is much more severe than the one she healed from your side and chest, however."

"Huh," I said. "Can all rock-men do that?"

"Falida is unique in many ways," Petra said. "This is merely one of the aspects in which my mistress is exceptional."

I was silent for a minute. Then: "Didn't Falida absorb your blood, too?"

Petra shook her head. "Falida spent my blood in order to move like she did. That's Falida's ability. She's a vampire, and needs blood, but she's very strong when she has it. Our relationship is, as I've said, much like a marriage. Symbiotic... I provide Falida with blood, and she provides me with protection, hmm?"

I nodded. "Okay, I get it. It's yuri."

She tilted her head. "Yuri?"

"Yeah. Girl-girl marriage is yuri. Uh, sorry, silly joke."

"Hmmm! I suppose it is yuri, then," Petra said, laughed a bit. "Yes. Yes, it is a little bit like that..."

I felt myself brighten up. "You get it! Pretty epic, hah!"

"Yes. Yes!" Petra, exultant. "I do get it... I get yuri..."

We laughed together for a little bit. You know, I was pretty surprised. Petra seemed really weird, at first, but she was somewhat easygoing. It was just that she was... centered, in a sense, around Falida, and so you had to accept that and work around it. She was just a lot simpler than I had initially assumed.

"So," I said. The conversation had quieted now, we had laughed a little bit, a little bit due to not knowing why we were laughing but doing that stupid silly kind-of-fun socialization thing young adults did—you know? Where you just laugh, with your friends, and it feels good. Petra did seem to be pretty young, though I felt like she was probably older than me...

"Hmm?" said Petra, stooped over Falida.

"Rudolf... what's his deal?"

Petra closed her eyes, and like she was reciting (though she couldn't have possibly been) raised a finger: "He can't take someone dying because of him! Whether due to his action or inaction, he just can't take it. When Falida let us know you weren't of Sunder, I knew that he had already decided, in that moment, that he wouldn't leave you behind."

I was silent for a moment.

"He told me to stop throwing up, to respect the injured soldier," I motioned to Falida on the ground.

"You should have," said Petra. "That is very disrespectful of you. Falida agrees," she said. Whimsy infiltrated her voice!

"I can't..."

"No-o-o, Falida says you can control it," said Petra. She looked up at me, and said: "It's really simple, Falida says. Falida knows how, you know how, and I do too... just swallow your vomit back down."

Some time passed before Rudolf entered the camp again. Enough time for me to realize why the forest felt so weird! The dreamlike nothingness of it, the total darkness, sensory deprivation... it was the sound, or lack thereof.

When you're outside in nature, you expect there to be some things audible, right? When you're outside in nature, you expect to hear the sounds of the cicadas crying.

There were no cicadas, not anymore, not since the dread rider and our escape; the dark forest around us was completely, utterly silent, but for the sound of our breathing. Whatever birds or beasts or crickets or creatures had lived here once had fallen ill and died and not resuscitated because there was nothing.

Rudolf and I avoided each other. There wasn't anything else we could do, right? Neither of us would give up our pride enough to have a talk at all with the other... reconnecting is hard, after all. I felt like I understood Rudolf well enough to understand why he was upset. So since I felt like he had to be justified, to some degree, in his world...

... I was left with only Petra and Falida, and really only the former. Falida spoke only through Petra, after all.

That was, until the soldier woke up.

"He's going to be on his legs soon?" said Rudolf.

"Falida says that what God and his Gears will shall inevitably come to pass."

"Frustrating," said Rudolf.

"Falida," I said, careful to speak after Rudolf had retreated into the shadows. "What's the timeline? We're supposed to be... reconnecting with Sergeant Wienlie, right? When? How far away are they? I don't have a good view of the world at all, and it'd give me some peace of mind to know."

Petra tapped her bottom lip, laid a hand on Falida's chrysalis...

"W-Wienlie..."

His voice was surprising. I expected it to be higher than it actually was—but no, it was deep, though raspy. The soldier's cracked lips had opened and he had spoken. And he had listened, too, hadn't he? Yes, he had.

Excitedly, I dropped down to the soldier's level, placed my hands on the chrysalis. "Yeah! Wienlie! You know him, right? You have to be a soldier who knows him."

"Water," said the soldier.

"Water..."

We didn't have any water besides what Rudolf and Petra had brought for their rations. Petra perfidiously refused to spare any

of her own, so silently Rudolf took charge of the situation, bent down over the soldier, and let him drink from his flask.

Water ran in rivulets down the side of Falida's tomb. It spilled from the soldier's mouth (of course he wasn't able to keep it all in!) and nevertheless he guzzled more, quenched his thirst, couldn't get enough, kept on drinking—Rudolf pulled back the flask; he had taken too much.

But Rudolf was...

Generous, wasn't he? Rudolf was a generous person at the end of the day. Of course he'd allow the soldier to do that...

Petra said, aside, to me: "What you asked before, about Wienlie, the effort to reconnect."

"Yeah," I said. "Has Falida—?"

"Mhm. We were all separated from Wienlie by that dread rider, the dreadful horse-mounted acolyte. We have his trail, though... Rudolf isn't just a mage. Rudolf has an artifact, given to him by Tyr..."

"It's a tracking artifact," I said. "The box, on his hip."

"Mmm! Close! Falida, what do you say? Should we tell him?"

I looked hurriedly back at the soldier and Rudolf and Falida's main body, ascertained nothing important was happening, looked back at Petra.

"Looks like Falida is going easy on you today! Its ability is called Requisition. He gives a linked box to someone else, which can instantly transfer to his own box any object of or under a certain

mass, and he's been using this to communicate with Wienlie, using Falida's effervescent, lamplight glow..."

"He's taking letters, and that's why we keep stopping and making Falida glow," I said. "How can someone see the glow through the forest...?"

Petra looked up, up, up, through the trees and the branches and the line of her eyes stretched up, terminated at...

The white moon that shone in the sky.

"Someone's always watching us, Wayfarer."

"The moon," I said. "You're saying someone is watching us with the moon?"

There was no lore on the moon. None that I remembered. The moon, then, was wholly original to this world. And so too were the abilities of this moon wholly original to this world, unknown to me.

"Yes! It's a very strong ability. On a night like this, midway through the lunar cycle, the moon is pulled back way too far to see anything like us in this forest, at least in any detail. But Falida's light is so unique and strange that the moon can see that from a distance."

"Is that Wienlie...? Or, or someone else,"

"Who knows," said Petra. "Wienlie is an ally of many things. Wienlie Otio-Fuget. *That* Wienlie."

"Oh yeah," I said. "That Wienlie."

She watched me. Finally she said: "... Falida says, where did you say you came from, again?"

"I..."

I considered. She probably wouldn't believe me, if I told the truth. And it was to my advantage to keep it closer to my chest, right now. Petra/Falida and I were in a temporary alliance—right now—but there was no telling how this'd pan out in the future. What if we became enemies? Yeah, I could always tell her in the future.

"I'd like to discuss that when we've gotten to Wienlie," I said. "It'll be safer under his aegis, right?"

"It will," nodded Petra. "I will respect that. But Falida is curious. Let's hope the journey isn't long, hm?"

005 / poor moribund stanislaw

I mentioned our guest greedily drank up so much of Rudolf's water, didn't I? I did. By the time he was done (Petra and I had fallen into silence) he had taken the majority from the flask. It was okay...

"Hey," said Rudolf. "Hey, you ready? Alive, ehe? You can talk?"

"I can," said our guest, gasped our guest. "I, I can. Yes! I was with Wienlie. Fell behind, was left behind ..."

"They're leaving people behind?" I said.

"Falida says that Lady Luck culls who she pleases," said Petra. "Falida says that it was bad luck for this guy, tehe."

"That's..."

"It's what must be done," said Rudolf. But his voice was tinged with dissatisfaction—Rudolf... that wasn't so congruent. Maybe Rudolf couldn't take the idea that the values of his beloved Wienlie didn't match up with his own. Still, it was screwed up that Eric totally got left behind. There was definitely more to the story.

Our guest coughed. Blood flecked from his mouth. Even in Falida like this he was still bleeding, badly. I grimaced a little bit. His wound seemed a lot worse than mine; therefore it would take him a lot longer to be on his feet compared to me, I thought. Did we have that kind of time?

"I'm Eric," said the boy, finally. "Eric Sostos. It's—khaah—good to meet you guys... you need directions to Wienlie? —

Locations…?"

"I'm Wayfarer," I said. Eric glanced at me.

"—Name's Rudolf. The lass is Petra. The crystal around you is Falida," Rudolf cut me off. I pursed my lips a little bit.

"Thank you guys," said the boy. "I feel torn up, but… I can make it, I think. Wouldn't be alive if not—khah," he coughed again, bloodily.

"Are you going to be able to move with that injury when you're out of Falida?" I said.

Petra and Rudolf glanced at me.

"I'm just asking the questions we need to ask…"

"That ain't the question," said Rudolf. Huh?

"Falida says that it's possible," said Petra, blandly, after a moment. "The damage is rather severe. Falida's pain-suppression and anodyne effects are all that's keeping Eric here so sane…"

I stopped—I had to think quickly. Things really weren't looking good for Eric.

"Falida can stay in this gel form, right," I said. "What if we made small lacerations on Eric's body and infected his wounds with Falida?"

"It wouldn't work, I think… the effectiveness of Falida increases the more of herself she has," said Petra. "Up to a point. Each individual connected piece of Falida is its own brain with its own orders, you know? The smaller it gets the stupider. The less able it is to tear through your body and rewire all the

connections like Falida is normally. With that little Falida in your system, you can't hope to have anything beneficial happen to you. It'd be like getting all the dust content of a normal rock straight into your bloodstream. Total death!"

"..."

I turned to Eric.

"It'll be really painful to move, really hard," I said. "You have a lot of... is it internal bleeding?"

"It's everywhere bleeding," said Petra.

"Okay, you have a lot of everywhere bleeding," I said.

"Wow," said Eric.

"... Yeah," I said. "Wow. You're really injured, so it's unlikely you'll be able to carry yourself through the pain."

Rudolf glanced at me; I didn't dignify him with a look of his own.

Eric was silent for a second. "I can try."

"You can try," I said. "You can try."

"Don't say it like that," said Eric.

"Like what?"

"Like you expect me to die," said Eric.

"I don't know who you are, I've not met you before, don't take this as making enemies," said Eric.

"But you're a fool if you expect me to just give up because of pain," said Eric.

I was silent. I didn't know how to respond. 'You don't know your limit?' That was my genuine thought... but it wasn't like I wanted to antagonize, right? I could have said 'Okay,' I could have said anything...

"I—kah—have a family to get home to, and... and I'll do anything, get it? I'll do anything to get home to my family. I'll pay the price."

"Okay," I said. "That's admirable. That's really admirable, seriously. It doesn't sound genuine coming from me," ("it does," said Petra in a weird tone,) "but it is! It's admirable. I'll hold you to that, Eric."

"Yeah?" said Eric.

"Yeah," I said. "I will."

We spent several more minutes waiting—Falida would pulse, every so often, sending out the bursts of light I now knew were for the purposes of Wienlie's tracking. We'd be seen by him, caught by him... when we got to Wienlie, this would be safe.

Safe. I hadn't really been treating the situation, up to this point, like a situation I needed to be 'safe' in. I'd been so off-kilter and hadn't had very long to get used to the situation... and because of that I hadn't really been taking this whole thing seriously. Antagonizing Rudolf? Now that I had time to sit, now that there wasn't a rider or a sincewraith or anything else to distract me, I realized that it was foolish.

I wanted to say sorry, I guess.

"I'm sorry for telling you that stuff."

Of course you know that when you meet someone you form a connection to them that hurts, hurts so bad to break.

"Hahaha."

"I was acting like an idiot."

"Can't we go back?"

I dragged myself through the snow—reached out my arm—wouldn't she take it? It wasn't like everything had fallen apart. Our connection couldn't have frayed so badly. I couldn't have ruined all of it. I couldn't have. I couldn't have.

I fell.

Reconnecting is hard.

Petra took me aside, again. We'd been having these little two-on-one conversations a lot in the last hour. She was smiling, same as ever.

"Wayfarer," she said, cutely.

"Petra," I said, awkwardly. My voice was slightly quieter than I had intended it to be.

She looked up at the moon. Then, she extended her hand. "Falida says let's take a walk."

I glanced at her, followed her line of sight—she was looking at the forest.

"Just to step away from the ears of anyone who might pry," she said with a giggle. "Come on! It'll be fun... the cicadas are gone."

"What is up with that," I said.

"Falida thinks that it was the rider," said Petra. "Its dread aura caused all of the cicadas to molt right out of their shells! But the issue is that they weren't all ready... ummm, imagine what happens when you steam milk and it overflows, right? Because it gets all steamed..."

She motioned with her hands. "I'm following," I said.

Petra looked at me.

"That's what happened with their organs, says Falida. They overflowed right out of their exoskeletons! The cicadas forced themselves out, they were so scared. They died, they were that scared."

I was quiet for a second, until: "Falida's not serious, is she?"

Petra shrugged. "Walk with us."

I stepped out with her. Falida was with us, so it'd be safe, I thought to myself.

"Where do you keep your Falida?"

Petra tilted her head back in the direction of camp.

"That's not right," I said. "You have two Falidas, don't you? She's split up between camp and the one on you."

She smiled a little harder. "Falida says that wasn't a very hard deduction to make."

"It wasn't," I agreed. "I just wanted to be sure. She's under your clothes, isn't she? Armor. Skin contact, so you can talk to her."

"Who can say?" said Petra.

"Falida," I replied.

Petra hummed.

A beat of silence passed. We stopped, probably ten meters away from the clearing, now, in the dense underbrush.

"Why did you take me out here?" I said.

"We need your help to vote," said Petra. "We need your help to decide if Eric Sostos will live or die."

I froze, and thought.

"It's Falida," I realized.

"Yes," said Petra. "We do not need to ask Rudolf or Eric. We know how they'll vote—to keep Falida connected to Eric, right? To delay. We can't take Falida in her healing state anywhere. So we have to pull Eric out of the healing state. We aren't going to split our Falidas," she grinned, "and—"

"This is screwed-up," I said. "The other two people, to match Rudolf and Eric, are you and Falida. Voting, of course, to disconnect Eric. ... Um, um, that won't kill him though, right?"

Petra shrugged. "It almost certainly will, actually... I wasn't exaggerating when I said everywhere bleeding! I can't guarantee it, but I'm quite sure he'd die if we took him out now."

"Shit," I said. "I don't want to... to,"

Petra tilted her head. "To?"

"I don't want to be responsible for his death," I said.

"Why?" said Petra.

"I don't want to be that kind of person," I said. "I don't want to kill people because it's easier. Why, why would Rudolf and Eric be wrong to say let's sit?"

"Wienlie isn't the only man with a hegemony on the moon," said Petra.

"Okay so the Sundered King is watching us too and sending riders to kill us. How is that any different from wandering around in a random direction trying to—no, wait, where are we even going? All these things, none of them are clear to me,"

"There's a rendezvous point we're approaching..." said Petra.

"I guess it's news to me we aren't just going in a random direction," I said.

"And, well," said Petra. "Ummm."

"Ummm?"

"Well, I didn't want to pull this card," said Petra.

I said: "What."

"We didn't kill the rider," said Petra. "Rudolf knows this too. He thinks we can. But I think that only Wienlie can."

"What does Falida think," I said.

"Falida..."

Petra was silent.

I looked down, to my right. "I'm not voting to pull the plug on anyone. Even if I don't like them very much, like Eric."

"..... Okay," said Petra.

"Okay?" I said.

"Falida will respect that," said Petra.

"We'll have to fight the rider," I said. "Won't we. That's what you were getting at."

"*We* will have to," said Petra pointedly.

"Okay," I said. "Like. Okay."

"You don't add value to our outfit," said Petra. "Falida disagrees, but that's what I think."

"One minute you're saying I sound genuine, and the next..."

"I'm just honest...? The world exists irrespective of my feelings..."

"... Let's move back into the clearing," I said. It wasn't, after all, about whether or not the world existed irrespective of our feelings or not. It was about what was nice to say to someone, whether you liked or disliked them. Could Petra grasp that concept? It was alright.

Me and Petra moved back into the clearing. Eric was still in Falida, healing. I turned and inspected the clearing—it was ringed with large blocks, or ruins, which reminded me most of Stonehenge, or... I guess if Stonehenge had multiple layers, stacked concentric one atop each other. What was this

configuration for? Was it some sort of, like, leyline magic construct? I didn't remember anything from the server, so I resolved to look it up. And there were at some point flowers, but they had been trampled underfoot by any of the many fights that had happened. Yes, the grass was generally flattened down, stomped down.

The clearing was totally open. There were too many vectors of attack. Could I cut any of them off? I considered toppling the blocks, somehow, but even if I could do that… I recalled the rider jumping over Falida's massive body, when she had blocked its path. The rider could simply vault over the blocks. It had an aerial advantage I wasn't sure how to negate.

It had a long halberd, too. It was both highly mobile, and had high range. And I remembered its attack with the shortsword at its side… that attack was nowhere near as forceful as its strike with the axe, but it was powerful nevertheless. So the rider excelled in close and medium range.

Yeah… the blocks turned vertically as they were currently were probably too high for it to just leap over. Plus, their spacing made it so that it was harder for the rider to maneuver on its horse and attack with its long axe. If I wanted to engage with the rider in a close-quarters fight, I'd beeline toward the ruins.

Eric was healing, and Petra had settled down, eyes closed, leaning happily on glowing Falida. That left only Rudolf—Rudolf, who had also gone to stand among the ruins ringing our clearing.

I walked up to him, slowly. He turned as I stepped within fifteen feet of range.

He was silent.

"I assume you want Eric to survive," I said, and then stopped.

"Is this a threat?" said Rudolf. He watched me, bearclaw.

"Oh. Oh, um, no. It's not. It was a question. Petra dragged me out of the clearing earlier and asked me to vote on whether or not to, uh..."

"I can fill it in," said Rudolf. "Do I have to turn around and put a curse on Petra, cut her up?"

"You don't," I said. "I voted against disconnecting Falida, and Petra seemed sincere when she said she wouldn't override a majority vote, no matter how much she and Falida wanted to not fight the rider."

Rudolf grunted.

The wind blew; there was no sound.

"Why'd you do it?" said Rudolf.

"Well," I considered.

"Be truthful," said Rudolf.

I paused, to figure out what I wanted to say. How I could say the truth? Ah, I was overthinking it. I just had to say what I felt as truthfully as I could.

"I didn't want to be the kind of person to leave someone else behind."

A beat passed, as did leaves, solitary in the wind.

I knew that Rudolf wasn't going to say anything, so I pressed forward.

"Why... why aren't you upset with Petra?"

Rudolf barked something that I realized a bit too late was a laugh. "Ehe! She's an adventurer, showed up for the joint operation, before this I'd never met her in my life. I ain't got no power or control over her. What she chooses to do with her abilities and powers is her own decision."

"I would be mad, because I think it's the right thing to do," I said. "I don't think it impugns Petra, though. She did ask, and I think she'll honor it, even if it's not the result she wanted. She's straightforward that way, which is something I really like," I paused, "about her."

Rudolf watched me. He smiled, briefly, wryly, then he looked away again, at the treeline.

"Well, kid," he said, considering. "It ain't just that it's the right thing, that she's an adventurer. You've seen her. She's weird, you know that. I don't expect anything more from her than I expect from the world, nature itself, Sunder. So..."

My lips twisted at that, a little bit. It felt wrong. It wasn't like Petra had something wrong with her. She was eccentric, but ...

Maybe she did have something wrong with her, but it didn't feel good to acknowledge. Petra wasn't someone I wanted to target. She didn't mean anything by what she said, so...

What was I doing? If I wanted to defend Petra, I should just defend Petra? By hesitating on it, all I did was confirm I wasn't going to say anything at all, just let rot seep into me, and move on.

"She doesn't deserve that," I said, finally, forcing myself to say it. I was averse to conflict or even mild disagreement unless my

feelings were at a high... and I didn't want to jeopardize what seemed like a moment in which Rudolf was coming around on me. But I really had to, you know? Principles and stuff.

Rudolf grunted again.

I glanced at the vial on his waist. "What's that," I said.

Silence. Rudolf seemed to be boiling over, though... I could tell he was ready to go back to the camp, but somehow he was kept away, warded, a wraith.

"Alright," I said. "Last thing, I guess. How is it to do magic? How do you project your mana?"

He tilted his head. "Y'can't? Let it come it from inside of you. Like you're dripping it from the folds of your brain, like coffee."

Coffee exists, I almost said aloud. I had never really been a coffee drinker, by choice rather than anything else; I didn't want to have to spend any money on it or anything.

I stared deeply at the treeline.

"Are you trying kid," said Rudolf.

"Yeah," I replied.

"Ehe," he said.

"What?"

"You're not very good at this at all."

"You told me it was like coffee."

"You have to say the words," said Rudolf.

"WHAT words."

"What's the words of the spell," he said.

"Power blast," I said drippingly.

He stared at me as if I was a meaningless and complex number...

"Ehe," he finally said.

"Am I a lever that moves the world or what," I said hopelessly.

"Eeeeehehaha," he said.

Eventually Rudolf returned to the center of the camp, drawn inexorably back to Eric. I felt like I understood him better, somehow. I stood out, for a while, and continued to try to cast something; to figure out the right words, and find the power inside me to grasp magic. I had to have that ability, right? Everyone had that ability, in this world; my body in this world had to have that ability. It was such an absolute law even in the original server those who came into this world without the ability to do magic would gain it, cosmic equalizing, rendering of what is due.

I shoved my hands forward at the ground, forcefully. I clenched my teeth and I did it again and I said "Blast," and nothing happened. And nothing happened and nothing happened and nothing happened. I couldn't even get a handle on how to start so I was unable to 'practice' at all, whatever that meant, and so...

It wasn't something I wanted to give up. I had run into this sort of thing before, you know. With things like music, or art, where I couldn't cross the moat of no skill to start with, so I never got to the point where it was easy to get good, so I never got good.

Here it was a bit different, though, because while with drawing you can ultimately just place lines down to start, with spellcasting I couldn't even figure out how to even start starting...

I gave up.

I moved back into the camp, walked to Petra...

"Petra, how healed is Eric? Can we go?"

Petra raised one finger and solemnly dramatically set it on Falida.

"Umm... it's a little bit complicated to tell," she said finally.

"What do you mean."

"I think right now we have a thirty percent chance of making it," she said. "Or he does, I mean. We could go now and probably get away from Sunder's watch..."

I looked at Eric.

"You mean it's a seventy percent chance he dies," I finally said.

"Falida says yes... exactly,"

"That ain't acceptable."

I turned to look at Rudolf behind me. He shook his head.

"I... agree with Rudolf," I said, turning back to examine Petra's reaction—or lack thereof.

"Don't," said Eric from the floor. "Speak of me like I'm some kind of object..."

"Quiet," I said. "This is necessary and strategically relevant."

"We're staying for him," said Rudolf. "We'll stay until ninety percent. Petra how long will it take for him to hit ninety percent."

"Ummm? Falida says it'll probably be... eek! Hours at this rate!"

"Eighty percent."

"One hour and a half Falida says with a certain tone... too much as well!"

"Seventy."

"Forty minutes," said Petra after a pause. "She wants one of us to bloodlet over her so she may rush."

"Wait," I said, and stepped over to the sincewraith corpse. I grabbed the top half and dragged it—it was surprisingly light, I noticed—to Falida. "There might be some blood in this she didn't get, first."

I lifted it up, over Falida; gore fell out. Most of it was dry but some was still wet; Falida pulsed.

"How smart," said Petra, clapping.

"Forty minutes," said Rudolf.

"How long have we spent here, anyway," I said.

"It's really, really been hours..." from Eric,

"Ummm? It has not been hours,"

"Minutes. Thirty. They ain't cheap so we can't waste more."

"Aren't we wasting minutes on this guy already...?"

"U-uh! Wayfarer! Didn't you tell me you didn't want to move on without him being healed?"

"... Yeah,"

"W-wait, you stood up for me?"

"It ain't about you,"

"Rudolf understands, I guess,"

"Wayfarer."

"Wayfarer?"

"Wayfarer, look at the trees."

I looked at the trees and, my vision penetrating through dense underbrush and forest, saw:

The bright glint of gleaming silver-stained-red.

006 / swallow your vomit down

OH NO NO NO! Bad place to be! The rider's scar horse sauntered, stomped, snuffled and snorted and yet lingered in the forest, behind the ruins shielding us. I took a breath in, and tensed up, and I could feel my heart beating faster, ever so faster, and I noticed I felt shocked, surprised, confused, and I tried to guide my mind back to the situation at hand, spending a second to close my eyes, deliberately, and then open them once more.

"It isn't approaching," I said. Rudolf nodded, slowly set his hands in position, and said:

"**Fancy trick, glint of the...**"

I stared at him.

Rudolf met my eyes and nodded, before slowly returning to gaze at the rider, which slowly, slowly moved around the clearing, circling, circling...

"Woah," said Petra. "Are you doing some kind of fake pre-casting...? I'm all out of my Clemence Chambers, and soon Falida will be blind, and weakened... that doesn't matter for your spell, though, does it?"

"What?" I said. "Wait, Falida will be blind? Weakened, because she's split, mostly tending to Eric, right?"

Petra returned her focus to the rider on his dread horse. "Yes," she said, more solemn. She didn't elaborate on the blinding.

The rider continued to circle and then I realized it. The rider skipped an opening too small to fit between, skipped a ruin with too many nooks and crannies, skipped, skipped, skipped... I realized it. The rider was trying to navigate to the most advantageous part of the circle of ruins.

It needed to find an attack vector that cut off as many advantages on *our* side—the opposite of the side it'd charge from—that it could. So it wanted our side to be open longly, a tunnel forward, so that it could pursue and cut us down, it wanted us all to be funneled one direction, if possible, so that it could chase us, and trample us. The quiet, steady thud of its feet hitting the ground—it slowly circled.

"He—Sunder—hates intelligence, yet he has no qualms about harnessing its power for his own," I said, suddenly. Hated it. No consistency, illogic. "Petra. Rudolf. I think he's circling to find the best angle of attack," (Rudolf nodded, rolled his head in a way,) "when he stops," I paused. "Shit. Shit shit shit. What can we do?"

Both Petra and Rudolf were silent.

"Can Falida as she is now puncture the rider's armor?"

"Ummmm," said Petra. "That's an open question!"

"Okay," I said. *Alright.* "Petra, what did you mean by Falida will be blinded."

The rider circled. Petra looked at me. Finally she proclaimed it: "The rider's demesne...!"

"Shit," I said.

What did we have? Rudolf had a spell saved up, a spell which would make it so that the rider would believe an attack had truly taken effect. But he only had a limited number of those. Petra... had Falida, but there was no guarantee Falida could pierce the rider's armor, and while blind—whatever that meant—could Falida even hit the rider in the first place? Eric was useless, and —if we wanted to keep him alive, we had to keep Falida at low power, *and* we had to somehow *stop the rider from hitting Eric.* We could convince it that Eric had been hit with Rudolf's spell but how would we move Eric? He was immobile. God! And even if it worked, what then? How would we beat the rider?

Falida was the key, *somehow*. Falida was the only of us with the power necessary to kill the rider. Therefore we needed to get Falida into the position where she had the ability to penetrate through its armor and kill it.

"Here's to the king," said the rider. Its scar horse sauntered, stomped, snuffled and snorted and suddenly leapt forward and fell, propulsively, cratering the well-trod earth. And whirring its spinning axe above its head rotated and rotated in helicopter fashion and then its blunt butt fell like a comet directly downward, penetration—

"RUDOLF DON'T FIRE AND FALIDA OPEN A HOLE IN ERIC," I said hoping they would understand.

Eric screamed like a madman, you know. It was better than it could have been? I assumed that the hole Falida could open would be totally clean, nonlethal, that everything would be routed around but be kept as in-place as possible. But...

The thorn on the end of the halberd speared straight through Eric's body or where Eric's body—so substantial and solid, in

place at once—where Eric's body was before the hole opened.

My eyes tracked to where it had entered. Falida hadn't been shattered at all which was my main goal—but I had misjudged her capability. I could tell from the blood, running clear and free inside her gel insides—Falida had simply torn a circle in his body without care for his health. She could heal it, couldn't she? As long as Falida wasn't shattered it would be *fine*. We'd make it through. God!

Well. They understood, at least?

I swallowed, looked at the rider, who didn't seem to notice at all he hadn't killed Eric, Eric who screamed and thrashed inside Falida, who couldn't do anything.

This was. This was good. Eric and Falida were okay. Rudolf hadn't sent his spell. Did the rider—did the rider even know Petra had a second Falida? Petra had confirmed that, hadn't she? Alright. I needed to communicate this to Petra. I was forming a plan. I was *forming a plan*...

"How's Falida see," I said, and Petra replied "Mana," and I nodded, and, loudly: "hide your offense," and I grabbed Rudolf's arm. He shouted, we ran, ran back towards the open, clear lane the rider had cornered us into, the simple funnel.

"Rudolf," I said. "Your spell is line-of-sight, not target-based, right? You were able to u—"

The rider exhaled and reality took on a shade. Inversions and distortions permeated in the darkness, wispy airy will-o-the-wisps flickering in and out of existence, I cut off. I swore but no sound came out.

But now I knew for sure what was happening. And I understood how Falida had been blinded.

"You were able to use it on the rider back in our first encounter," is what I was going to say. *I had figured out the rider's ability,* and figured out Rudolf's spell by extension. Let's take a tour.

The rider's ability had to have been to silence things, at a stage one potency, on top of projecting an ambient sphere of slightly muted sound around it. Hence the sound of the cicadas disappearing, hence our voices being so quiet when we didn't mean for them to be that way.

As for the other half of that ability?—silencing was one of a certain few terms in the server that referred to a very specific, somewhat complex concept (in that there were a lot of stipulations on its boundaries and definitions): stage one was the total nullification of sound—and of ambient mana, the *unfocused* mana that ran through every thing and the world itself.

That's how Falida saw. I had thought that was how Falida saw—that was how *houseki* saw, in Labyrinth Climbers, but I had to be sure. Petra had confirmed it for me. By suppressing the ambient mana in the area the rider had blinded Petra.

Now.

Rudolf would still be fundamentally *able* to cast his spell with audio because his words were calling upon one of the functions of the world, rather than just being free-floating words. That spell could be aimed either through line-of-sight or via direct targeting. I knew it *couldn't* be direct targeting because that

relied on an ambient mana signature to lock onto. And he had been able to cast it on the rider in the very first fight.

This all meant that his illusion magic had to be a projectile of mana, that Rudolf aimed himself. And *that* meant it worked for my plan.

I thought furiously, how would I represent it to Rudolf? I scrabbled with my hands, matched his position of pointing fingergun, cupped my hand just like him, met his eyes meaningfully.

" !" I shouted, my voice hoarse, no sound came out. " !!!!!"

Read my lips, Petra! Please...!

It was a good thing, in a way. This miscommunication meant that the rider wouldn't be alerted to my plan, not if it wasn't reading my lips. But I had to trust Petra. I had to trust that she'd watch me and understand, that our connection would hold, that we'd be able to communicate even if we couldn't win easily, talk to each other...

In a fight like this, you have to get it right. You have to get it right, and then you have to keep getting it right, over and over.

I gritted my teeth and motioned, meaninglessly, with my hands. Petra watched me, befuddled, I tried to point, and it was meaningless, all meaningless, all useless, all-knowing and all-agony. Was this all? Was this it?

The rider rushed at us. It ignored Petra. But that didn't matter, because Petra couldn't hear me.

(In the snow.)

" !" I shook Rudolf's shoulders, and my words would've been incoherent anyway—but they were, of course, silenced. He shrugged me off, balefully looked at me, turned toward the rider and I ground my teeth harder and ran forward toward the rider.

"**—Light!**" from Rudolf, and I dropped to the ground, sliding, as the rider swung its axe! I passed under it, and,

"**Drag to dark and dispel.**"

The rider spoke: its spell went off. I felt something change in the air around me and that was all; I was next to the rider and it had dispelled Rudolf's illusion with its Dark magic.

Dark was the strongest attribute in the server, for it could annihilate and subsume all other magics. It was bad luck, that was all.

My death was bad luck.

The hooves bore down on me and crunch and crunch and snap and gristly sinew tore and.

And.

I stared upward.

It hurt so bad.

And I saw the rider move past me, to Rudolf. I saw red; there was blood in my eye.

But, I realized.

It hurt, and yet I didn't feel frenzied at all. I didn't feel like I couldn't do anything. I was... entirely in control, wasn't I?

And, I realized.

This was Unbreakable. I would have gone into inoperability. But I could see the world, clear as day and dark as night. It was so beautiful.

I realized another thing. It wouldn't have mattered if Rudolf's spell had gone off. We were facing the rider. So the rays of mana would've hit its front. Which wouldn't have shown Falida the weaknesses in its armor.

No. We would've had to have fired a spell...

At the rider's back...!

I had my chance. I had my chance, didn't I? I had to grasp it now. I *had to use a spell.*

Coffee. That was a stupid metaphor, I realized. No. I had to find an equivalent for each attribute, and manually test. I had to manually...

The rider moved toward Rudolf in slow motion.

" ," I said, calling for Falida. No. It couldn't kill Rudolf. I had to save him. *I was put in this world for a reason.* It wasn't that I was some sort of genre-savvy idiot—"I'm isekai'd, so I have to save everyone!" No. No! I was put into existence to save people even if this wasn't a new world, in any world, I needed, couldn't let anyone die like that...! That's why...

How many attributes were there? I would start with the elementals, the common ones. No use trying to see if I had a rarer one if all I needed, if all I needed...! If all I needed was for Falida to help! I needed to GIVE FALIDA EYES!

" !" I said, picturing the spell tearing its way from me, explosively, consuming, burning.

" ...!" I said, picturing the spell spewing out of me, washing away the rider. Blood spewed from my mouth and I choked and pulled in another breath. I was dying, wasn't I? Dimness encroached. I felt limits...

Then wind. Then earth.

" !!!"

No. No no no no no. I couldn't manifest it inside me. I couldn't muster the capacity to—to do it—I needed to. I had to act, didn't I? I pulled. I pulled what was inside of my heart as much as I could pull it, as much as its tensile force would allow, I pulled past that, I pulled until it broke. Until it shattered. I wrung all of it from inside me: Straining:

STRAINING:

"**JUST—TAKE IT AND DIE—!!!**"

I didn't realize I had screamed until it tore its way out of my mouth and my hand, framing the rider, fell to the ground. I let out a shaky breath; my head flopped down.

Something had left me.

I had to keep watching. I had to see what happened next. I tore my head up though I was covered in dirt and blood; Unbreakable muted it all, destroyed what pain I felt—!

The rider approached Rudolf while mana left my hand shaped like wind and rushed fast *as* the wind towards the rider's back

and it collided and—the rider was rocked with a gentle breeze. Cut dispersed into an area of subtle force.

" ," I said.

Falida exploded forward from Petra, shredding her sleeves, tendrils rushing and rushing and the rider almost turned in time—but Falida found it first. SKEWER IN TRIPLICATE.

" ," I said

Three tendrils pierced into the crags of the rider's armor, the rest shattered, and then the tendrils pierced further, further, into its body and up up up and and and. Blood exploded from the rider's visor. It jerked on its horse.

" hahahahahahahhahahaha," I said, laughing, madly, my entire world was black, I was bleeding, dying, but who cared? Who cared? We had won. We had won against the rider, the rider only Wienlie could defeat! We WON, no matter the cost we had won.

Red permeated my vision. Blood dripped down from my temple and pooled in my eye.

Red like blood darkened, dried—I blacked out.

007 / i hear the waves

Rudolf's eyes ran up and down the black knight before him. The thing had been stabbed through all over; spikes through the gut, and the chest, and the helmet, and every joint. Blood ran down from each joint, pooled. Stained the horse, whose head had lowered. The horse, which had stopped moving with the rider's death.

Damn it all but that fight was lucky, wasn't it? Rudolf had said to Petra that he thought they could take on one of the two acolytes. He hadn't believed it, though. The mere idea of it seemed daunting...

They had done it. It had been with that boy's help. That boy's help was, in fact, *critical*. He thought the kid was useless, and... he had been proven wrong, hadn't he? He laughed bitterly.

He looked down at his hands, twisted in that same position: finger pointed straight-ahead, fingers clenched, so tightly, so tightly—pale spread, the lack of blood, excruciated and exsanguinated...

Below his left hand was his right, in cupped shape. Slowly he opened his hand, slowly he unfolded it as if revealing the treasure inside. Sticky sweat kept him glued together but—he unfolded it.

The black knight shook and shook in dying throes on the horse. Then! The spikes retracted, disappearing inside its form. Falida retreated; the black knight toppled. A pool of red blood so visible in the moonlight spread.

"Petra," said Rudolf finally.

Eric writhed in pain. Did it matter? It didn't. Rudolf ignored his sobbing.

Falida slowly dragged herself across the ground, disappearing. Her mass shrank somehow. On the trod grass and mud was left a streak of dark red, like a snail. Her path led to Petra.

The sleeves of Petra's sturdy garb were blown apart and the rest of it was in disarray. She breathed heavily and was pale. Falida slithered up her arms. Aaaaahh, she said, high-pitched, repulsive. Whimpering Petra whined, Falida disappeared. And Petra wobbled, collapsed.

"Petra don'tcha dare," from Rudolf, he slowly stood up, wobbling, shaking. So close to death. And yet so far? Between all four members of their groups Rudolf was in the best shape, perfect shape.

He passed by the body of the kid. He'd been trampled and slashed—one of his arms was hanging by a sinew.

"Petra," said Rudolf.

"Fuck," said Rudolf.

"Fuuck," said Rudolf.

He grabbed at her body. She wobbled.

"It's okay," said Petra. Her voice was insubstantial. "It's just blood loss..."

"People die when they lose blood," said Rudolf.

"Check Wayfarer," mumbled Petra. "Is he dead? Save him first..."

He hesitated, reassessed the situation—yes, Wayfarer might not be dead, yes, he was more worthy of salvation, then—nodded and dropped her, compulsively wiped his hands on his clothing. She teetered, tottered in place, fell.

Rudolf bent down over Wayfarer, he breathed still. Hesitating Rudolf turned to Petra, turned back, turned again. He didn't want to move Wayfarer, not while he was still so injured, so bleeding, yet... strange, he thought. The measure of one's spirit is what protects one from slow death. Wayfarer had no spine nor moral backbone, so how was he still alive? Unbendable and unbreakable he clung at the boundary of death and life, and burning, burning, refused to let go...

"Falida, if you can hear me," he began, took in a breath, grimaced, continued: "Save this man from death! Leave Petra! Accept a sacrifice of my own blood, and bend to my will. Come, vampire, I summon you."

There was silence in the clearing. Falida did not respond; Rudolf twitched. He looked down at Wayfarer, confirmed: Wayfarer breathed still, shuddering, slight breaths; and his heart beat still.

"FALIDA! You hear me! Come and save Wayfarer. Come! Wayfarer saved you and I, so come! You are the only creature here with that power, so come!"

There was no response. Falida was silent, yes! She would not respond. She was a vampire, wasn't she? Such a greedy one too. She was reducible to a carnivore then. And a carnivore...

Rudolf's face twisted. It was fine! He would seek regeneration at the end of the day! Debts would be paid out, canceled, and he would be restored! It was life. But Rudolf could not allow anyone to die. Even if it was someone like Wayfarer, so...

"Then, Falida," he said, stepping toward Petra, insensate, unconscious on the floor. "Take my ear, or both, if it suits you. Is that not enough? In that case take three fingers of my left hand; the thumb, the ring, the pinky, and any three of my right, excepting the thumb. Take them, Falida! And take my blood, too. Take these *promised offerings*, Falida."

And there was silence in the clearing.

But the orange lights beneath Petra's clothing glowed brilliantly.

I awoke.

Where was I? White lights floated above me. Wisps but not like the rider's—they were whole and pure. Above them was—orange light. So it either was the morning or the evening, dawn or sunset.

I tried to push myself up with my left arm, but I couldn't, because I had no left arm. It was painless, at least? Something had adjusted already, and it was painless.

"Shit," I said, "Holy shit. Holy shit," I scrabbled around, realized I was lying on something like scratchy cloth, pushed myself up, saw: I was in a camp. A white light floated near me. From its top sprouted a stellar line, connecting wispily all the way up, up...

All the way up to the moon ...

"Hiii," said a familiar voice to my right. I turned, pivoting on my only arm.

Petra waved at me. She sat on a trunk, with her legs tightly together, cloistered. She smiled, maybe a little bit embarrassed, or maybe a little bit melancholy.

"Petra," I said. "Uh. Okay. Um. Where are we? I thought..."

"Wienlie's arrived," said Petra.

"Oh," I said. "Oh. I can put it together. He rescued us, and this is his camp."

"Yes," said Petra. "I've been waiting for you."

"What happened to my arm," I said immediately. "And wait, what does that mean?"

Petra ignored my second question—"In the fight against the rider, you were pummeled and crushed... it was really gory and tragic! I thought for sure you had died. But you held on, somehow, to a strand of life and sanity. And you were the key, weren't you...? I wasn't sure at all how Falida was able to kill the rider, but it was because of you, wasn't it. You used the magic inside of your heart to slaughter it straight-up."

I nodded, slowly. "Yeah. Wind attribute. It was useless as an actual spell, but since Falida was there..."

"You did really good," said Petra. "Really, really good. Thank you, Wayfarer. I think I would have died if it wasn't for you. Or Rudolf would have, and Eric would have. And that would've been so sad, wouldn't it have been?"

"Yeah," I said. "Sorry, um. Where are you going with this?"

Petra's mouth clicked, squishy-saliva, she opened it, then closed it, then "Oh," then "Right. Umm, about your arm... Wienlie says he'll have his healer regrow it. The original arm was so savaged and torn-up his healer couldn't put it back on. But, um, there's an issue..."

I tilted my head.

"The healer Wienlie has now isn't his main healer, so... that healer can only *heal,* not *regenerate*. So Wienlie wants you to know that... when his healer finds the power within them to *regenerate* your arm, she will help, but..."

"But before then, I'm out of luck," I said.

"Mhm," said Petra, nodding.

"Yeah," I said. "Okay."

"Okay?"

"It's okay," I said. "It's alright."

"Okay," Petra's face brightened, she closed her eyes, raised a finger, lecturing, "I knew you'd be strong enough to endure it! You have a spine and moral backbone, after all..."

I have the presence to admit I had been planning to throw a bit of a fit about it, but with Petra saying that I just smiled, gruesomely, and laid back down, staring upward at the sky and the little lights.

"Petra," I said.

"Wayfarer," was her response.

"Can I ask you some questions?"

"You can..."

"You have Falida on you, right? You haven't mentioned her at all so far, when usually she chimes in kind of often."

"Mhm," replied Petra. "She's just quiet right now. We aren't in a time of crisis, or anything..."

"Okay," I said. "Sorry, that wasn't my actual question, that was just out of curiosity."

I was wondering to what degree Falida moderated Petra's behavior and to what degree Falida told her what to say and listened in on our conversations. But I didn't expect Petra to part with Falida, ever, and this had confirmed it (unless Petra was lying, but there'd be no reason for her to do that).

"Oh, yes, I know," said Petra.

"You did?"

"I did," said Petra.

"That was kind of me asking how," I said.

"Oh, yeah... well, I guess I kind of just figured it out!"

I looked at her.

"Okay, um, for my real questions, I guess,"

"Go on, go on!!"

"How much time do we have to talk?"

"Neither Falida nor I see a reason to cut our time short. Hurry up, though! I'm getting bored by all this cautious prodding and tiptoeing..."

I winced. She had clocked me, a little bit ... half the time in any setting I'd dance around making sure everything was right, and the other half I'd be overly reckless, incautious...

"Alright. I'm gonna ask some questions that seem really, um, uneducated, I'm warning you," I sat up, began to lock in, so to speak,

"Hurry up," said Petra.

"Okay, agh... sorry, I have no sense of urgency,"

"Hurry up!!"

"Alright! Okay. What is the basic structure of the world? Physical and political."

"The world is flat," said Petra. "It is largely comprised of oceans. There are seven concentric rings on its surface. In the middle is a large, long, and vaguely contorted landmass, twisting in on itself, with a smaller one next to it, continuing its spiral, but I think the connective part of the two is underwater, anyway!—we call it the Plateau, even though that's not the right name. It's the name that all of the strongest people gave it a very long time, though, so we still use it. That's where humanity can flourish."

I nodded slowly. None of this was news to me, after all. It confirmed it, at least—the world was at least very similar to our own Labyrinth Climbers Discord roleplay server. The quiz had to be connected somehow. The quiz, or...

I thought about my theory from before, that it could just have been a delusion of the mind. But just like before I had to dismiss it. There wasn't anything that could actually, actionably be done.

"I'm understanding. And there's the good guys and the bad guys, the... Clockwork Revolution, and the Sundered King."

"... Yes, that's right," said Petra.

"You said the Clockwork Revolution's ideal is a... picture-perfect, pretty, printed existence for everyone," I said, leading. This wasn't something that had really been elaborated on in LC, so ... it was the first thing I was curious about. "This ties into the Edict of Revolution."

"Mhm," said Petra. "You want me to explain, I assume. Well... it's a... sort of enlightenment. It's the *knowledge*... of *a* virtue. Before the Edict of Revolution no one in all of humanity had any hope at all. They were being slowly suffocated. After all, the Sundered King hates us because we can think—well, he hates us because we're so visible and prominent. He hates *everything* because it all thinks. Even the world thinks somehow. Numbers and math are what the world runs on because it's logical and material. But that's not what Sunder believes the real world is at all. Sunder wants to make complex all the numbers."

"I don't understand," I said. "Why does he hate intelligence? It sounds like he hates... ah."

"Yes," said Petra. "He doesn't hate all the aspects of intelligent thought. Of course he doesn't! Then he would hate himself because he would hate his own fury, and he doesn't hate himself, I think?"

"He hates consistency? Or, logic? He hates things happening because other things happen, or..."

"Sure," said Petra.

"But he feels angry because things are happening, so on some level even for him everything is consistent."

"Yes, well," said Petra. "He hates everything that isn't inconsistency, so isn't it perfect for his own position to be inconsistent?"

"Ha," I said. "That's really stupid."

"He's really stupid," said Petra. "But he's overwhelmingly strong. And because he indiscriminately chases down and exsanguinates the universe's order humanity can't ever be safe from him. Not until he's totally dead! Consistently, materially dead."

"He's on the first ring, concentric around the plateau. That's where we are now," I said.

"That's correct," said Petra. "Wayfarer, why don't you know these things?"

I watched her.

"I woke up in that circle of corpses that you found me in with memories of another world," I said. "You can believe me, or you can not believe me, but that's the reason for it."

"Oh," said Petra.

"Oh?"

"You're like a porter," said Petra.

"I'm not," I said. "I think it was a proper summoning ritual, or I think... well, I'm not sure about how I think about reality anymore. If I was reading about a character in a story, I would jump to thinking what happened to me was something meta or

unreal, because... that's the new fashion in stories where stuff like this happens. But I *feel* real. I can touch things and move around. And the way this day has been structured doesn't feel super story-like, except for what I did in the fight with the rider, which was definitely... definitely like a hero's journey thing."

"What?"

"Sorry, I'm thinking aloud. Um... it's just, I'm here now, right? And the logical thing to do now is to just accept that my previous conception about our world was totally wrong. But it's totally wrong in a way that's too... it follows the rules of a genre too much? It's not like there's any fundamental beauty in isekai fantasy stories. It's just like this happened like it would in a story not similar to a story but just like a story."

"Oh," said Petra. "Are you saying you have a genre in your world for stories about being transported to other worlds? We have those types of stories here too. There was this one very popular paper serial, *Sir Penderbane's Planehopping and Guns*, about Sir Penderbane, who jumped across a lot of different worlds, all with different customs and people. And the goal was to open up portals, by fighting people, to go through the portal again, and fight more people, over and over. It was too long, and some of the worlds weren't very good, but it was ultimately loved by some people, and that's fine, right? That's the point of art..."

"Huh," I said. "I feel like I've heard that premise before. That's not really how our genre is, but... hmm. Well. I would like to read something here, at least. I want to see how the cultural sensibilities differ between my world and yours."

"I get that's not how your genre is," said Petra, "and, ummm, I didn't really expect it to be the same. But, like... well, for *Sir*

Penderbane's it's a little bit different, because there *are* different planes, that's kind of what happens with porters, it's not like being full-on transported... but, um, if there *weren't* planes, and I got transported to another plane *just like* in *Sir Penderbane's,* I'd feel a little bit crazy! Because it's not like the world should follow the template of a story so lazily and closely."

"Yes, exactly," I said. "Yeah. Well, it's the difference between... *Sir Penderbane's* is based on the Labyrinth, and the equivalents in our world were styled kind of like travelogues," (Petra nodded enthusiastically) "but for me it's like this world is *based on* my own *Sir Penderbane's*. Which shouldn't be how it works. Because reality doesn't... work like that."

"Yeah, I understand," said Petra. "Hmm. I see."

"You see?"

"I understand how you feel!" she replied. "And also, I do have a little bit of a collection of *Sir Penderbane's,* the second half of the serial—which you could probably read by itself—and some of the first issues too, but it's at my house on the Plateau. We can go there sometime after all of this, the excursion... or, or if I die, and you survive," she said, excitedly, "here, wait. Here! I'll write it down on your arm. My address. And there are keys hidden in the flowerbed somewhere but you'll have to search. Here, wait," she rummaged in the pack beside her, and stooped down, and wrote:

DOOR II; 266 EIGHTEEN ST.; URBS; LAN FOULIER; OULEID

"Second door of building two-sixty-six on the eighteenth street of Urbs, repeat it!"

"Um, um," I said, insensate, "Second door of building two-sixty-six on the eighteenth street of Urbs! Got it. I have it memorized forever and ever even if my other arm falls off. Promise!"

"Yay!" she said. "Cool..."

"Haha," I said, shifting.

We were quiet for a little bit. I almost forgot I was missing my arm.

"So, Petra," I said. "There's only one human nation, right?"

"Oh, no," said Petra. "Well. The Edict of Revolution covers *all* the nations. But there are three nations. Two who share the mainland of the Plateau, Ouleid and the Free Republic of Andurn. The third is in the smaller part of the Plateau, and isn't really allied with the other two. It's the Democracy Sinterlait."

"So Lan Foulier is where you live, in Ouleid?"

"Mhm," said Petra. "It's fine. It could be better... but really at the end of the day it's a super fine place to live."

Everything supported it—I had been transported into the world of Labyrinth Climbers. These were the places I knew. This was the same world. All of those places which we cut down on, barely fleshed out...

"There's another important place, isn't there?" I said. "The city."

"Yes," said Petra. "In the middle of the Plateau, rising so beautifully from the water, tall and proud, is the Clockwork City."

"Yeah," I said. "I know about that. You don't have to explain *it*."

In the original server, everything was deemphasized for the city's sake... all other aspects of the world received minimal writing for them. The city was the core of everything, and the hope for everyone. All the nations of the world were united in the defense of the city, and the great triumvirate of the city, the three-faces-in-one-man Tyr protected them in turn. Ouleid, Sinterlait, Andurn; none of the three were given more than a paragraph of time. They didn't matter, after all!

I'm going to get a little technical here, so bear with me. The measure of success for a roleplay server when it comes to design is the number of possible stories you can tell. Of course people like interesting, unique ideas and worldbuilding—but that's not what makes your server *blow up*. Rather, the key to popularity is to make your server close to other servers, so it's not hard to change your mindset and learn new things, but better. Accessibility and freedom are paramount.

Labyrinth Climbers was by all standards an extremely successful server because it went for the straightforward fantasy aesthetic. There were elves and dwarves and all manner of fantasy creatures, an epic big bad you had to defeat, the magic was simple enough yet evocative enough to get people interested...

Well, as a result of this, specific areas of the server weren't given a lot of time or writing, because the effort would mean the server became *less accessible* as a result—too much *new stuff to learn*. Rather, they were given aesthetics, images, pithy one-line sentences, and...

I never felt like the world of Labyrinth Climbers breathed. Did this world breathe?

"How?"

"How what?"

"How do I not have to explain it..."

"Oh," I said. "Er, I was given some select, general information about the world in my transfer, and I had confirmed that it was accurate by asking you questions about the shape of the world."

"Oh, cool!" said Petra.

"Yeah," I said.

"Yeah," replied Petra.

"I want to go see Rudolf now," I said.

"Hey hey hey, don't get up, you'll hurt yourself, hey, heeey!"

008 / minus six

"You can't just get up like that," Petra said to me. "Seriously! You're gonna get yourself hurt!"

"I do think you're being a bit of a nanny right now," I replied. "I'm not going to hurt myself now that I've *been healed*—outside of the regeneration I clearly need right now, this is, really, really debilitating-feeling, moreso than I could have expected,"

"Because you're missing one of your two very important arms," Petra nodded.

"... Are there unimportant arms?"

"W-well, Falida says that it's a figure of speech..."

She tailed me as I made my way into the main camp. There were several tents set around the ashes of a main campfire—an actual fire, imagine that! The white lights buzzed about, patrolling; it was surprisingly desolate, probably with people in their tents, but that made it so that it was easy to find Rudolf.

"I'd be smoking right now if I had any cigarettes," Rudolf said. His back was turned, but I assumed he had heard me approach. He was sitting at the ashes of the fire, staring into it. "You know, illusion magic gives you the ability to trick yourself into feeling it, and tasting it, taking it in. But when you know it ain't real, that makes it so the whole effect is ruined. It ain't any different, except for the fact that you know it's fake, and that makes *all* the difference."

"Cigarettes give you lung cancer," I pointed out banally.

"Yeah well a lot of things give you cancer and a lot of things take it away," he paused. "Kid."

"I guess I didn't consider that cancer isn't actually that bad here," I said. "I come from a place where there's no chance you'll ever get your limbs back if you lose them, and where cancer is one of the scariest, most vicious ways nature can kill you, completely out-of-nowhere, not your fault at all."

"Yup. Say, where'dya say you're from...?"

"It's not super important, except for the fact that there were no magic or abilities, and if I get a chance I'll explain it to you later," I replied. "It was really isolating for me, though. So I don't know a lot of basic things I should."

"Did you lie to me about being on the side of the Clockwork Revolution?"

I paused for a moment. Best to come clean, right? "... Yeah, sorry, I did," I said. "I am, but only in spirit. Wienlie doesn't know me."

"I know he doesn't, I talked to him," said Rudolf. "I was wondering if you were from a different cohort. Doesn't matter now! You've admitted to it."

"Falida says you're really talking like Wayfarer's super guilty," said Petra. "Um, I think that's kind of bad? He didn't do anything, right? He helped kill the rider, the rider that would certainly have killed you and he, right?"

"It's fine," I said.

Rudolf stood and turned. I looked him up and down and my fingers caught on—his hand. Six of his fingers were missing,

three on each hand.

"What happened," I said instantly. "To your fingers. They're..."

"I fed Falida them, as a deal. To save you. No one left behind, mm? Don't want to be that kind of person. You're lucky, Wayfarer."

"But, but Wienlie," I said.

"Didn't matter. He arrived fifteen minutes after the deal was made. Would you have survived that long? Who knows? Certainly not me. I don't regret my decisions. I can cast my spells just fine with these fingers—and it proves my willingness to self-redeem." Rudolf smiled, but not gruesomely or viciously. "It's just what happened, and it ain't anyone's fault."

"Fifteen minutes. ... Yeah. Yeah."

I considered saying that I was sorry anyway, but I felt like Rudolf wasn't looking for that, and wouldn't accept it. So I just nodded, once, twice, and on the third I kept my head down in an acknowledgment; I tried to paint a picture of a self deeply respecting, and...

Rudolf said nothing. I opened my mouth, voice coming out in an "Ah," sound, but I stopped myself. What had I to say that was meaningful or relevant? I was caught.

"What is it," said Rudolf.

"Oh," I said. "I figured out incantations."

"Ehe."

"No thanks to you."

"Ain't illusion, then?"

"Wind," I said.

"That ain't bad," said Rudolf.

"Isn't it?"

"I ain't a wind mage myself and I didn't have any formal instruction with magic—there's a reason I only got one spell—but I've fought some and with some," he replied. "Wind ain't bad."

"It can't do a lot," I said.

"It does things fine," said Rudolf.

"Well, it can blow on things, I guess."

"Tip. A new mage like you or a shitty mage like I should always focus on condensing their mana into a single point and launching that. Don't spread it over a wide area. It'll work out. Take your time and be thoughtful with it."

"Huh," I said. "Yeah, you're right, actually. Well..."

I didn't have intuitive mana control yet—I didn't know how to cast a spell with any skill. But now that I had done it once, I felt like I knew *vaguely* how to do it again—it was still unsure in my mind, but totally, definitely way less so than it was before.

"Well, yeah," I finished. "Yeah, I guess I can practice that. Thank you, Rudolf, actually."

"You're welcome," Rudolf said, "but it's basic stuff."

"I appreciate it anyway," I said. "I didn't make the best first impression, so..."

"Mmm. You showed yourself," he said. He looked past me, to Petra, then looked back at me; his mouth flattened into a line...

"I assume you're staying with us for the final push," he said. "Forest's boutta get hectic. I wouldn't recommend trying to break now; down that path lies doom."

"Yep," I said. "I want to stick to you guys and Wienlie as hard as I can. Strength in numbers, right?"

"Ummm... there's no need to mention that there's a second Acolyte of Sunder somewhere out in these woods, and so..."

"Right," I said. There were two Acolytes in the original server, too; but they were only present for the last battle in the ring. The rider we had killed here in this Labyrinth wasn't one of them, and was weaker than the Acolytes of the server. "Yeah. Double my yep?"

"Ehe."

"Rudolf? We should explain to Wayfarer the plan..."

"I'd wait for Wienlie on that. He's got the final call and everything."

"Okay..."

"I'm good with that," I said. "It's the morning, isn't it?"

"Mhm! Wienlie and his friends are going to be out of their tents any minute. He's probably already awake, brooding and communing. You know, they say he doesn't sleep. Instead, he goes outside and sprints up to the tip-tops of the mountains and absorbs his energy from the moon, watching over all the people he loves dearly."

"I don't," said someone? Someone totally new? Said someone behind us.

I turned to look at our savior, the man who would lead the incursion into the deep and dark. He was middle-aged and hadn't shaved in a way that gave him a pleasant-looking albeit generic beard. He had silver armor and a zweihander, which floated beside his left arm. The zweihander had a series of capsules or chambers inset into the center of the blade near the base.

"Wienlie," I said. "It's good to meet you, I'm Wayfarer. Petra and Rudolf found me in the woods. We have a lot to discuss! I have a lot of questions, about this world."

He waited until I was done and smiled. "That's good. Maybe we can be allies."

"Yeah," I said, waiting for him to say anything more. His eyes slid off me, though, noiselessly, silently... he stepped forward, moving without animation.

"Umu. You're entering camp," observed Petra.

"I am," said Wienlie.

"From whence?" Petra took charge; meanwhile I wondered. Was he in communion with the moon?

"I was pissing," said Wienlie. He smiled slightly and lingered like that before his face fell once more and he stepped past her, then me.

I looked at Petra. I looked at Wienlie. He walked past Rudolf too.

"Is he going to, like," I stopped.

"Wienlie isn't that way," said Petra.

"He's," I stopped.

"He's super banal, I agree," said Petra. "Well, they tell stories about him anyway. Steadfast in life to be experimental in myth?"

"Banal is a good word, yeah," I said. But I felt like there was something I was missing. "I'm not sure that's really how I'd describe him, though, steadfast? I dunno..."

"He is," insisted Petra. "He is, seriously... he's very reliable when it counts, isn't he?"

Rudolf nodded. "Yes. Simple but simply reliable."

I made a noncommittal sound. I guessed they could have been right, it was just... something very certain nagged at me, and I didn't know what else to say. I decided I'd drop it. Wienlie would prove himself in the intrusion, wouldn't he? Yes, certainly he would.

"Petra, do we or Wienlie's group have access to any items that would allow us to restore our mana?"

"Nope," replied Petra. "They aren't very cost-efficient to manufacture when it comes to military-grade levels of mana compared to your natural regeneration. And mages with a good amount of latent mana are able to regenerate military-grade levels of mana pretty quickly—for outside of combat, anyway, so..."

"Huh," I said.

That was a difference. We had oriented the balance of mage combat around their regenerating 5% of their mana pool at the beginning of their turns. So since a turn usually only lasted a few seconds, that meant that within minutes even the worst mage could regenerate their entire pool. That wasn't really a good amount of time when in *combat*... but it meant Rudolf shouldn't have had so little mana. And my own wellspring felt full, too. So...

"What is it?"

"Rudolf," I said. "He... has a ton of mana, but his spells are super expensive? No, that can't be right, because he'd regenerate it all back at the same rate."

"Rudolf has a passive drain on his mana that counteracts the majority of its natural recovery," Petra said.

"Oh," I said. "Yes, I suppose that is the only obvious answer, isn't it?"

"Mhm," said Petra. "I don't know what it is. But I theorize it's probably the box he uses to communicate with Wienlie. Some artifacts can't *totally* power themselves off of the ambient mana in the air."

"Well, I knew that," I said.

"Of course," said Petra.

"Another question," I said.

"Mhm?"

"Would you say that the rate of natural mana recovery is roughly a twentieth of your wellspring every few seconds?"

"I wouldn't be able to answer," she replied. "Because, um, I don't use magic, remember? Falida occupies all of my will. Maybe you should ask Rudolf, or Wienlie? Wienlie is a magic knight..."

"Yeah, I guess I should," I said. "I have one more question."

"Can I ask you some in return?"

I tilted my head. "I guess so. Can I refuse to answer them?"

"Well, maybe," said Petra.

"Alright," I said. "Sure. So mine is, uh, with regards to abilities. Falida has one and Wienlie has one. You and Rudolf don't, though?"

"Hmm, well, abilities—well, people say they come from *Tyr*, but it's just a saying... he doesn't actually give people abilities. People say he has access to the Engine Incalculadus, which is *really* what gives people abilities, but no one actually knows if he does for sure."

"I more meant, uh," I stopped. "How do you get them?"

"There's a limited stock of about nine thousand abilities in the Engine, the number isn't round, like it was at one point—which I think was twelve thousand?—because some have been broken or merged over the generations," said Petra. "Probably seventy percent of these are leased out at any given time. Well, you're asking how they're leased out, so... sometimes, when you have a —personal revelation, I guess, is the easiest way to express it?— in the middle of a frenzied and heated moment, sometimes

when that happens the Geist inside of the ability sees you and frees itself from the circular currents inside the engine, navigating to your *you,* and attaching itself."

This was all absolutely new worldbuilding, stuff that hadn't been present before in the server. The fashion in roleplay servers had pretty much *universally* been superhero anime-style abilities that characters just *possessed,* and Labyrinth Climbers continued that trend, offering basic metaphysical explanations for which parts of the soul your ability required, and little else. There was not a lot of room for creativity or interesting constraints in the roleplay sphere, because it was all about the most stories that could be told—the better you could port your favorite character from a different server, essentially, the more popular and accessible the server would be. So none of this was present in Labyrinth Climbers, and I made a note to read and ask more about all of it later.

"So, like, figuring out your own truth," I said. "Realizing something fundamental about yourself?"

"Yeah, sorta," replied Petra. "It's... I guess I shouldn't be talking, without an ability, ummm? But I've heard it also described as an acceptance, I guess. Some people save uttering the words that summon the Geist for critical moments, because you get a sudden surge of last-minute energy when you gain your ability in a fight!"

Was I denying anything to myself? ... I decided I wasn't.

"Alright," I said. "Thank you, Petra. By the way I'm noticing you're using a lot of Is, and bringing up Falida less."

Petra tilted her head and smiled. "Well, Falida isn't an expert in absolutely everything! When I'm talking to someone and the

stage is less chaotic, I don't love to just parrot her totally-entirely. She also likes to stay quiet when she has little valuable to add."

"Aha," I laughed a little bit, "telling me to shut up was valuable,"

"Nuh-uh," said Petra, "that was me, I was lying about it being Falida. Hehe!"

"Oh!" I said. "Oh."

"Can I ask you my questions, now?"

"Yeah," I said.

"'Kay, so, um, first one," said Petra. "Wait..."

"Wait?"

"Yeah," said Petra. "And be quiet."

I was silent. She closed her eyes. I watched her for a little bit, as she subtly softly smiled, and I too was lulled into closing my eyes, as if falling into a deep sleep, lured by sirensong. There was no birdsong, and so the rustling of the trees felt empty and somehow melancholy. Perhaps Wienlie's group would be exiting their tents soon? We would see.

"Hey, don't close your eyes," Petra protested. I opened them. She leaned into my face. I hadn't noticed that she was the same height as me until now?

"You've never felt like you totally wanted to die off, right?"

"W-what?" She had tilted her head a little bit and her brow had furrowed as she said it—and overall her image was the perfect pretty-printed picture of sincerity.

"Die off! It's a better word than, like, kill yourself, or be killed. Catastrophic levels of killing! Killing to the max, killing squared? Or maybe killing to the power of three. You've never wanted to be killed to the power of three, have you? And it has connotations of loneliness, too... a solifarer killing streak, totally exponential, tehe!"

"What kind of question is this," I almost laughed a little bit.

"I wanted to know if we were *similar,"* she said. "But, ummm, okayyy... I guess I'll sub it out for another? What's your real name?"

"Aaaah," I said, I stopped. "Ah, um."

"Is that one bad, too...?"

"I'll answer the first," I said. "I guess I used to be doing worse earlier in life, but ... no, I've never felt like I needed to die off. Mostly, I..."

My vision drifted to the side, bouyed.

"Well, I guess I kind of faked feeling like that, to exert power over other people, right? I didn't have anything at all wrong with me except for this desire to control other people." My mouth tightened into a line. "If you hear me I say I'm manipulative a lot of the time, in contexts where I have a lot of stability and comfort, it's not me, I guess, fishing for comfort. I don't need any comfort about that aspect of myself. If anything I want to be told about it, so..."

"Well, you'll use people telling you that you're manipulative as absolute proof that you are," said Petra, "and instead of doing anything about it you'll hurt yourself repeatedly about it."

"You don't know me well enough to make those calls at all," I protested.

"Hehe... a little bit," said Petra. "Those are actually Falida's thoughts."

"The line between you two is really blurred, isn't it?" I said. "You can never really tell."

"That's the way we like it," said Petra. "It keeps other people on their toes!"

"But, yeah, I guess. I'm kind of..."

"You don't have to keep going," said Petra. "Well, I understand you even a little bit better, now!"

"Do you like me the same?"

"More," said Petra. "I'm quite fond of you."

"Oh," I said.

"Um, is it not obvious enough?"

She took two little steps forward and suddenly she was offset—slightly to my right, but nevertheless we were chest to chest, right breast to right breast, and she grabbed my hand and interlaced her fingers with mine...

"I do like you. I like how you treat me, aha. And, umm..."

"Uh—um," I started, stopped, "And..."

"And I was thinking maybe you like me, too?"

"Um," I choked. "Sorry, Petra, um, can I think about this? Can I think about this when we're, like, *totally* out of downtime, um.

Um."

"Aaauoh," said Petra, a weird sound; her fingers unraveled, unknotted, rope coming undone, and she looked down to the side to my left and we stood in the rays of morning light.

"I," I started.

"Yes," said Petra, "I'm sorry, Falida is sorry, that's fine. Yes, apologies. Yes, I'll be here. Thank you," said Petra, she started forward.

Did you know? Wayfarer has no spine nor moral backbone. That's why he didn't turn around and say anything to Petra then. He had kind of half-rejected her, unsure, in-the-lurch. It was fair, maybe, but did he put any effort into helping her feel better? What did Petra want, Wayfarer didn't know, but he didn't make any effort? Wayfarer has no spine nor moral backbone.

009 / your sine wave

Wienlie's group came out soon after Petra and I split. We were inevitably dragged back to each other—there wasn't anywhere in the camp anyone could go to be away from anyone else. And certainly Petra wouldn't have reentered the tent, so… yes, we reunited. She smiled a little bit at me, and maybe a little bit oddly. I didn't begrudge her for it, just shifted, uncomfortable, she sat next to me and I tilted my head away, yet…

Wienlie's group numbered eight. A timid girl likely the healer, a bare-chested barrel-shaped man, a ninja? A ratman, a stuck-up elf princess, a nondescript gray man, a woman with a dial on her head, and Wienlie himself. None of the troupe were characters I recognized (I was beginning to think it was likely that the canon characters had been *edited out*—but if my guess, that we were at the 'beginning of the plot,' was right, it would make equal sense I hadn't met anyone notable at all yet). They gathered around the ashes of the fire; Wienlie's greatsword hummed quietly at a beside; the morning rays had faded in their sunrise intensity.

"Today will be spent in fortification," said Wienlie. "I have a hope. There are reinforcements coming to assist us. They will be at our position in three days. With them, the penetration into the deep and the dark shall be made possible. Thus today will be spent in fortification. This camp is already structured amenably to it… we must entrap it and make it difficult for our enemies to invade us. Varim, this is your area of expertise, is it not?"

"H—khh! Yess," said the ratman. Greek-green vials of liquid clinked together at his waist; he was a large, bulky thing, the

largest of all of us outside of the bare-chested man, and he stood with a horrible hunchback. With that clawed-across and scarred white eye... "trapping is my specialty. Varim Ginsolkar, good to meet you all... tyeehenehehahehhe! H—kh... yeesss, Wienlie, at your command I will place traps all around. Perhaps in the entrance to this camp... I shall place a pit, that... can you guess? I shall place a pit that opens up to *lava!* And people will *fall* in this pit and *die*, yes?" He took a choking breath in, laughed.

I felt a little bit concerned for him. Was he okay?

"Varim here has the ability to turn things and the physical world itself into traps. He is one of the blessed thirteen thousand. It takes time—he must grow the traps, of course. But he will be our key. We shall look for areas to place traps, and Varim shall grow them for us. Varim, how long do you anticipate the traps to grow?"

"My ability has a *limit* in place," hissed Varim. He stretched his *i*s into *ee*s. "At the *minimum* a trap takes hours four and a fourth again to grow. At the maximum, forty-four and a fourth. And! Only four traps can grow at once. Tyehananahaha, we will have to be shrewd, yes? Yes?"

I scrutinized Varim. He had a lot of various pieces of junk strapped to him, or—no. No, that was all artifacts, wasn't it? He had an ability, and artifacts, and... I wanted to confirm something. Though it'd be a bit of an odd question...

"Varim, do you have magic?" I piped up.

"Yees, frond magic, why?"

"I, uh, I just wanted to know, you seemed the type," I laughed halfheartedly.

"What's your—hkkhhh! *name*, boooy?

"Wayfarer," I replied.

"Yeess, yes, that makes much sense! You and I, we shall go spearing sometime. Spear fish. Good to ask people about themselves. Must incentivize the younger generation. I hate spear fish but you love it? Yes? Yes? No?" He jabbed, with his hand. Then he turned back to Wienlie.

So he had magic, too. I looked around, and everyone else was similarly fully-built-out, at least in terms of their visible artifacts. Petra and Rudolf were somewhat different, weren't they? Petra and Rudolf each had one notable capability. For Petra, it was Falida; for Rudolf, it was his *single spell*. So…

Hah. Well, it was a classic setup for a quest, wasn't it? Petra and Rudolf were the equivalent of quest NPCs, I realized. Exactly the sort of characters *I* would have written. Distinct and with a certain aesthetic and level of archetypicality. Right.

"We all understand?" said Wienlie. "Questions?"

"Yeah," I said. "I'd like to know what's happening, please."

Wienlie looked at me. Everyone else also looked at me.

"What do you mean?" he said.

"What are we doing here," I said. "Instead of in the city. What can I help with. Et cetera."

"We're going to go deep into the heart of darkness and reconnect the outpost there," replied Wienlie.

"That is a very certain and specific phrase to use to describe the middle of the ring," I said.

"What's that mean?" said Wienlie.

"Nothing, I guess," I said. "What does reconnecting entail?"

"There is a large, cannon-shaped plug we must insert into the top of the outpost's main tower. This plug funnels mana in such a way that the outpost will be reintroduced into the communications network of the Clockwork City, and protected from outside harm."

"How was the outpost disconnected?"

Wienlie paused.

"... Sometimes, at some points, some of our own... become tempted by Sunder's promises, and they become Acolytes. I have nothing else to say on this matter."

"I understand," I said.

"I'm very glad," replied Wienlie.

I stayed away from Petra. She gave me some space of her own accord, too. But as a whole I tend to gravitate towards friends I already have, and there was only one option for that, was there? I walked just behind Rudolf as he brushed through the trees.

Bright white daylight filtered in from above. The sky was whiter and bleaker than I was used to; I lived in the American South before I was transported here, and the sky was pretty much always blue there. It cast dappled light all over us. We proceeded further inward.

The trees here were smaller than I had expected. They were meant to be ancient, according to the lore of the First Ring, big

massive redwoods. Elves lived in them; the forest elves had the ability to draw on the trees.

Wind elves, the default type of elf, were built around scaling up into realms of damage that would deal high backlash damage, putting them on a timer. Forest elves, on the other hand, had the ability to draw on plants around them; the more plants they chose to draw the life out of (vampire!), they stronger they became. So in their home ancestral they cultivated many trees, great trees, so many great trees, so that if they needed to they could take a massive stand against Sunder. They had a good chance of it, too! Elves were so strong, and forest elves were the strongest, given preparation time.

Anyway. I had expected them to be bigger, and some were certainly massive; but they were all within 'realistic' bounds, so far as I thought? They *looked* realistically massive, anyway.

It was really beautiful.

WAYFARER: Four traps, right?

RUDOLF: Yup.

WAYFARER (*pausing*): I have a question ...

RUDOLF (bending over, rock in hand): Shoot.

WAYFARER: So, about the first fight with the rider. The first one I was present for, anyway.

RUDOLF (tossing rock at tree): Yes.

WAYFARER: Do you remember the white seals that appeared along Falida's path?

RUDOLF: Yup.

WAYFARER: What were they?

RUDOLF: Almost a spell. Clemence Chambers; they store magic and an incantation.

WAYFARER: Petra mentioned those. What was it doing?

RUDOLF: Assumedly it was light magic, eh? The aesthetic matched, at least. Yeah, I'd be willing to bet it was light magic simulating blood expenditure for Falida, allowing her to move freely.

WAYFARER: That makes sense. Huh. I was given some knowledge of this world, but it didn't include Clemence Chambers, or anything. Why are they called that?

RUDOLF: Clemence was a major innovator in the field of artisanal artifacts until she died thirteen years back. She's also responsible for the plug we're using to reconnect the outpost.

WAYFARER: I see.

WAYFARER: So they allow someone to store a better spell than they'd be able to cast, and use it without an incantation?

RUDOLF: Yup.

WAYFARER: That's really really strong.

RUDOLF: Yup. They're very expensive, and can only be used one time.

WAYFARER: Why only once?

RUDOLF: I believe it's a legality issue. A Clemence Chamber can actually probably be used two or three times, each with

successively less strength, before it burns down. But no one wants to deal with magical waste. So we recycle them to make sure that the matrix inside stays operational. Have you ever made a slingshot as a child? It's like when yer slingshot wears down and snaps. It gets weaker and then breaks.

WAYFARER: But a Clemence Chamber breaks violently.

RUDOLF: Yup—I dunno if Petra has any respect for the law, ehe, but if she's an upright person like that, she probably could stand to use her Chambers twice. But there's always a risk. It's new technology.

WAYFARER: It's at least thirteen years old.

RUDOLF: New.

WAYFARER: Yeah, you're right. Sometimes I forget about the scale of history.

RUDOLF: It happens. Think about how all the conflicts of your whole week are only a small fraction of the conflicts of the month which is itself only a fraction of the year which is a fraction of the decade which is a fraction of the century, etc.... And as you grow older, too, it'll feel different.

WAYFARER: I'm not sure it ever will. I'm not sure I ever will feel older?

RUDOLF: Well, of course you'll feel the same, because you're the same you (WAYFARER: To a point.). But you'll see things differently, and that'll come out in how you act and behave. It's natural.

WAYFARER: Yeah ...

RUDOLF: Got something to say?

WAYFARER: I feel like I've never once matured, if that makes sense.

RUDOLF: How old are you?

WAYFARER: I'm eighteen.

RUDOLF: You have time.

WAYFARER: I'm sure.

RUDOLF: Don't 'I'm sure' me kid.

WAYFARER: Haha...

RUDOLF: I'm gonna tell you a story, so listen up.

WAYFARER: Okay.

RUDOLF: So many years ago there was this kid, he was real arrogant. Do you know about how schooling works in Andurn?

WAYFARER: I don't.

RUDOLF: This could be a good area.

WAYFARER: Huh?

RUDOLF: For the trap. Keep up? Okay, well. Schooling in Andurn is all done in the homes. You decide what you learn. So to assess your ability when you turn sixteen, the age of majority, you take this big aptitude test. Everything is grounded during the day of the aptitude test, this grueling six-hour marathon, and, uh, this test, it sets you on one of two life tracks.

RUDOLF: The test quizzes you on your understanding of Ouleidan, of history, of math and intuitive logic. The questions

of the test are not themselves hard. Most people score fine; a few people score amazingly, that's decided by the five-or-so questions scattered throughout each segment of the test that are really very hard.

RUDOLF: So this kid felt like he was so smart, and he was very pragmatic. He wanted to go to the Magicotechnical University of Menhart, which was very prestigious. He didn't have any particular passion for magic. He just knew it paid well and would allow him to live comfortably.

RUDOLF: Well, anyway. This test—the SSAT, Standardized Scholastic Aptitude Test—was what he needed to do well on to even have a shot at Menhart.

RUDOLF (stopping, resting his hand on the wood of a great tree): ...

RUDOLF: Well, he didn't ace it, but he didn't fail it. He didn't do good on it, he did fantastic.

WAYFARER: Oh.

RUDOLF: Oh?

WAYFARER: Sorry, I'm listening, that's filler, I just didn't know what to say.

RUDOLF: Ehe.

RUDOLF: Well.

RUDOLF: He didn't get in to Menhart. He could've gone to a different Andurn university, but he didn't apply to anything besides Menhart. He was very sure he would have gotten in.

RUDOLF: It ruined him at the time. His other friends went to universities themselves but he was left behind. Anyone would feel awful over it.

RUDOLF: He only had one spell he'd created himself, one spell at all, in fact. He put a lot of time into figuring out how to make that spell very good. But he wasn't good at all at magic, and wouldn't have been a good fit for Menhart anyway. It took him a bit to see it, but it was the way of the world.

RUDOLF: Call it the logos, if you like. Call it the rightness of the world.

RUDOLF: Whatever you call it, it pushed him a different direction. He decided to go into the military because he didn't know what else he could do at the time. He was really struggling.

RUDOLF: I haven't mentioned it, but he had a wife and a child. They tried to support their family best as they could but it was tough. So he decided to go into the military.

RUDOLF: Call it the rightness of the world.

RUDOLF: His wife and child left him at some point, he forgot the years, how many years it had been. He wouldn't ever be able to figure out where they went. It haunts the kid, now a man, even now.

RUDOLF: He saw a lot of people die, too. The military isn't without danger. Sunder kills many people; what matters is that we kill Sunder more. It isn't a good trade but it's one that must be done.

RUDOLF: ...

RUDOLF: I'm happy now.

WAYFARER: You are?

RUDOLF: I am.

RUDOLF: I grew up. Call it the rightness of the world. It's how it's meant to be. It took me a very long time to mature—almost all of the bad things that happened to me were my fault. But I did.

RUDOLF: It gets better as you get older as long as you put a foot in front of the other and never allow yourself to stagnate.

WAYFARER: I've seen so many of my friends stagnate, it makes me feel sick.

RUDOLF: That's a good feeling to have, kid.

RUDOLF: You must disdain stagnation. If you want anything to be done or to become anything you must become something immediately, not in the future. Something that must be completed will never be completed if it is not started posthaste.

WAYFARER: Yeah.

RUDOLF: ...

WAYFARER: Thank you, Rudolf.

RUDOLF: It's just what's right in the world. What is right *must* be done. You cannot be lazy or take half-measures. So do that, understand?

WAYFARER: ...

Varim the ratman found his four traps. A rock outcropping was beginning to grow, as if biologically, from the ground; explosives were stuck inside it like gemstones, and grew like fruit. As he said, he created quickly as well a falsified floor in one of the three entrances to the camp—underneath it was lava.

Varim's ability had another limitation—his traps had to be each of a different sort. His other traps I didn't see but were apparently placed at chokepoint positions in the forest. We were in the center of another circle of ruins, much less run-down, which meant that the enemies only had a few avenues of attack. In total only one path into and out of the camp wasn't trapped, which is where we'd station our guards, and...

We were set, weren't we?

We were set.

010 / end sign wave

Welcome to the witch's smoking room. I remembered the first time I met Cera. It was—2023, right? Three years ago. The server had just taken off. I remember at the time there was one user, Odd, who liked to joke that when summer ended, the server would die—this was actually back in March-ish, before summer had begun. But his prediction was well-formed. The majority of people in the Discord combat roleplay community in my experience are between the ages of fifteen and twenty; in other words, school-age. So when school gets out and they're released for the summer they suddenly have a lot of free time. They adjust and get used to this … and then when school starts again, it's suddenly gone. This tends to result in a relative downsurge of activity in a server, *even if* the server was alive during the previous school year.

So, then… it must have been before summer. Did I remember looking at the date and time? Wait, let me concentrate! If I use Historian, it becomes clear to me. December of 2023.

At the time I was fifteen. So was Cera? We were equivalent. She went by any pronouns, but later requested for me not to call her anything masculine, and I sort of grasped that she preferred feminine terms most of all, and the relative anonymity she kept online was—a coping strategy, maybe? Or maybe she wasn't yet comfortable with being so fully out as female online. Maybe she didn't…

Yes, well. It didn't matter much because fundamentally she was perceived as female. I mean, that's the way she presented, you

know? It was a situation like Stellar, but far more instigated on Cera's end. That's how she wanted to be seen, that's how she presented, and ... it became real.

How did it start? Probably it was in the staff chat channel. Welcome to the witch's smoking room. Cera had posted some sort of message implying she was going through it, like "I haven't been doing very good in real life," yes, that was the wording, wasn't it? And then I had... I had DMed her, I had said, "Hey, if you ever need someone to talk to, I'm open," hadn't I? Right, that was the beginning of it.

And we had talked.

We had talked a lot. There was a point where I was making my first *really relevant* character, and one of the first male characters I had ever put a lot of effort into, straight-up—I tended to play women. Cera, uh... God! This is a bit embarrassing, haha? Cera made a bait character for him. This wasn't *super rare* in roleplay servers, creating characters just to go with one that your friend made, but, like ... usually it wasn't with the express intent of romancing them, right? Right? Ahaha...

Well, I bet it's super-duper predictable, right, so maybe I can skip through all the preliminaries? Cera, um... Cera developed a crush on me, which I instigated. Did I return the feelings? I'm not sure, not even now. I wanted attention, certainly. I was a really immature kid in that regard. And I...

I was really possessive, for one. I mixed signals in that way a lot. I even called her my wife, haha, jokingly, just kidding, unless? I lavished her with attention and made sure to treat her kindly in the moment.

Yeah. It was no wonder when she finally confessed.

Of course, I rejected her. I'm sure you can figure out why: it's the type of person I am? Watch and see...

The group spent the day loitering. Wienlie said there was no reason to hunt or anything; the normal animals in the forest were scarce and we had more than enough rations for all of us to last another ten days. Reinforcements would be arriving promptly. So day turned inexorably to evening; the sundial fled.

I laid back in the pile of cloth I had awoken in. It was harsh on my skin, but that was better than the alternative, right? The dirt was awful, coarse, got everywhere... yes, it was better to lie on the rough blankets they had supplied me with.

I rested my singular hand on my belly and stared up at the blue-orange sky. My thoughts turned to Petra. I turned them away from Petra; I didn't want to think about her right now. I decided I would think about the world.

I needed to finish this and get to the Clockwork City. Once I was there, I'd hit the first main auction event of the server. That would provide me an opportunity to look for faces I recognized among the crowd and start making connections. After the auction event came the Rail, a boss-rush event, that lasted roughly half a year in server time. (I had set up a bot that kept track of the months and years; it ran at 4 times the rate of our own time in reality. So every year in real life was 4 years in the server.)

After that was downtime, before a long string of other events, higher-intensity and more slaughterous than any of those

before. I wouldn't think about those yet. I couldn't let my planning get ahead of me.

Well, I was kind of assuming that this world had all the same people and characters as in the original server. Which wasn't a guarantee, but ... I felt confident in that assumption. I really did.

"Umm, Wayfarer?"

I turned in the coarse bed, looked—that was Petra's voice, and there she came. Overlooking from behind a dense gray hill she peered at me, tapped her finger against her lip... I kind of winced and made a weird half-smile face.

"Hi, Petra," I said. So much for not thinking about her? Remembering what she had said came back to me in full force.

"It's nice outside," she said.

"Uh, yeah, it is. It's been nice," I said. "And we've been outside."

"The blanket is really coarse," she said.

"Yes."

"And stiff."

"Yes."

"And probably really uncomfortable and awful to sleep on," she finished.

"Um, probably," I replied.

A beat passed...

"So—" I said.

"Do you want to sleep with me?" Petra cut me off.

"Uh," I stopped.

"—Not in any weird way," she hastily elaborated, "Just, it must be awful, you know? Umm, sleeping outside, I mean... so you can sleep in my tent, lent to me so generously by Wienlie, if you want. It's big enough for two people, barely, and I don't mind if you roll. And of course I won't do anything to you, again, so you don't have to worry about that?"

"Uh," I stopped again. "I."

"You, um..."

"..."

"You don't have to, if you don't want to."

I was silent. I didn't want ... well, for one, I didn't want to come close to taking advantage of her, and I didn't want her to feel like I had worked through anything at all. It was just so abrupt, you know?

"I don't," I paused. "I don't want to give mixed signals."

"Um?"

"Okay, so," I began. "Something like this is obviously, like, it would be borderline if things were normal, but you, well," I paused. "I guess..."

"Oh! Um, yes? I..." Petra paused. "Well, ummm."

"Sorry, this is so awkward," I said.

"It's okay," replied Petra. "Seriously, um, I get it! Falida's been telling me, you know, helping me with figuring out how I made you feel. I don't want to make you uncomfortable at all! I feel

uncomfortable and trapped in sooo so many social settings, and umm, I want to avoid making you feel that way?"

I stared at her.

"Yeah," I said. "Thank you. Thank you a lot."

"I understand," said Petra. "I can think of it too."

"Right," pausing, I decided to get back on track. "So, with that said," I stopped. "I don't know."

"That's kinda weird..."

"Huh?"

"If you have all of the information, you should be able to just make the choice! Obviously some things are clearly better than others, right? You have the information that it'll be fine if you do, AND it'll be better than if you didn't do it at all, so..."

"Ahaha," I said. "Aha. Well."

"Weellll?"

"I guess I'll take you up on it," I said. "If you want me out just say the word."

"I won't," said Petra.

"Haha," I said. "Yeah."

"Thank you," said Petra.

"Why?"

"We could have stopped talking, and it'd have been very awkward and weird for the rest of the expedition," she replied.

"That's how it is already with me and Wienlie's gang, so it's not that out of the ordinary or impossible," I said. "But..."

"*But*. Hehe. Well then, I guess I'm thanking you for not ceasing communications with me," she paused. "I don't feel connected to very many people."

"I don't either," I said. "Though ... I don't know," I stopped.

"Wayfarer?"

"You'll regret it if you try to stay attached to me, I think," I paused.

"Is—"

"This isn't some thing where it's like, 'Oh, tell me I'm not evil, oh, say it's okay,' et cetera, it's not like I'm fishing for anything, I don't want you to say anything, I just want you to understand, I really am not good to be around and I want to communicate that before we go any further as friends." I took a breath in. "So you understand?"

"Umm."

"You understand, right?"

"I guess so... where's this coming from?"

I looked at her.

"I,"

"You don't have to say," she paused.

"Well," I stopped. "Yeah, I guess so, thank you. Maybe I'll tell you sometime? Just, have to, like..."

"I'm not sure I understand," said Petra.

"..."

"But I do respect you," she said, after a moment. "So, um..."

"Thank you," I said.

We were really quiet. So quiet! It was so peaceful, there were no sounds around us, it was me and her, and everyone else was in their place, and the universe was all in its place... and slowly I smiled at her, tentatively.

And Petra smiled back! And it was sweet, so sweet. It was beautiful, her smile was beautiful.

Just ...

I didn't think that I liked her. I didn't feel something for her. She was cute, I liked her personality, I just didn't feel *that* for her. And, and ... or maybe I did like her, but maybe I didn't want to, maybe I was, do you know? There's this behavior that I engage in where I get something nice, and then...

I mean, do I have to say it outright? Do I? Well, then—I didn't *want* to settle for Petra. I didn't have a fetish for her, did I?

Petra let me into her tent; I accepted it in the end. We partitioned sides. Hers, mine; she told me, umm, she wouldn't be miffed or anything if I moved around in my sleep, okay? She told me, umm, she totally understood.

The tent was made of the same rough material my pile of cloth had been made of. Maybe they gave me a lot of scrap supplies to

sleep on? Or, wait, maybe it was a tent, disassembled...? I wasn't really aware of a lot of the expectations this world had, so...

Ah! It was whatever.

I got the left side. Petra curled to my right, Falida's pulsating light was still illuminating the little tent; the rough material of the tent stopped the light from penetrating at all to the outside. It was like we were in our own little perfect pocket dimension, perfect-pocket-partitioned from the outside world. I didn't curl like she did cause I thought it was a little embarrassing—it didn't fit the impression I wanted to give off.

It occurred to me it had been a significant length of time—nearly two days—and I totally hadn't changed my clothes or anything. I was gross, and covered in blood and muck. So was Petra, though, so maybe it was okay? I think she excused me.

I elected to ask anyway though.

"Petra," I began.

"Mmh?" she said.

"It's okay that I'm," I paused.

"Ummmm?"

"Covered in gore and dirt," I stopped.

"Um, yes? Aren't I?"

"Oh," I said. "Yeah, I suppose so."

"Falida says that's totally confusing, why you think you have to play a different game and custom than I."

"I was just wondering," I said. "It's your tent."

"I don't think there's anything different about my dirt and blood versus yours," she replied. "Falida says that there *are* some differences, because everything in the world is itself and itself different, but I don't really care... you know, if it walks like a goose?"

"You have geese..." I suppose it shouldn't have been surprising at all? The idea that a fantasy world would have so much shared idiom was surprising to me, but at the same time not at all— after all, this world was based off a roleplay server, wasn't it? Most roleplay servers didn't require anyone to speak in conlanguages, so obviously...

"Mhm," said Petra. "They're a delicacy!! I can give you the name of this great big kitchen in Ouleid, they cook geese really well, you know?"

"Haha," I said. "Or you could take me there," after this, left implied, unsaid.

Petra was silent for a moment. There was a shifting noise. We each laid on our side now; she stared at my, met my gaze.

"That's a really beautiful image," she said.

"Isn't it...?" I said. Did she reject me? Or...

She reached a hand out, offered it to me. I saw it closely. It was the first time I had seen the hand of a girl so closely in real life, the first time I had ever had a moment like this with a girl, I took a breath in.

"I would really love to," said Petra.

I stared at her, and I suddenly felt really timid. Really, really timid. Petra? Can you hear?

"Falida says it's not nice to leave a girl hanging," Petra whispered quietly, quieter.

I took her hand with the barest of touch.

She held my hand firmly. I exhaled.

We stayed like that for as long as I remember. And slowly I fell asleep—I know it was before Petra. I know.

I exhaled.

I woke up. Or I had woken up. I was floating in a void. It was black, totally black, all around me was black—I looked up. I had my one arm, present, reaching up into the darkness, clutching someone's hand, Petra's hand? My other arm was nonpresent.

The hand holding onto me opened. I dropped and fell onto the floor, striped white-and-black. It bent into a total singularity in the distance (somehow the path was illuminated in white); to my right was a tree growing up from the floor.

A woman sat on the tree's branch. She stared down at me from above. Something about the length of her head was off. It stretched her eyes, up, up, fixed in a garish mask of surprise—I saw the rest of the red, ready to burst…

"It is ordained," said the woman.

My arm loosened in the socket, flopped. *Huh?* I stumbled backwards, away from the tree.

"Remember three things and you'll save them all," said the woman.

Flopping—wet gristle fell onto the floor. Blood and tensionless tendons fell out of the socket of my single arm, singularly falling to pieces, zombielike, necrosis now…

"One. No let nor lien for farmers."

"What?" I said.

"Two. What is is healthy to allow to have happened."

I could parse that. It was healthy to allow things to have happen, that's all, right? That's all?

"Three. My daughter's hands sometimes clasp."

Flesh sloughed off. With her piercing stare the woman regarded me. I began to die—the woman regarded me.

011 / love (full)

I woke up. Petra's hand still clasped mine. She shifted. I was kind of hoping that we had made more physical contact over the night. Just body contact! Innocuous, nothing noninnocent. It wasn't anything to do with Petra herself, I don't think—it wasn't like I wanted to be with her forever? I was hungry for physical contact, I supposed ...

I didn't really get that in real life. I was a bit of a misanthrope, simultaneously by choice and by consequence of my position. So Petra giving me this was already... it was more than I had ever had, it was more than I ever expected to have. I was greedy, though.

I didn't like that feeling. I didn't like that thought. I didn't like thinking I was using Petra, I didn't want to use her, I didn't like knowing that I knew I was using her for comfort like this and still... agh.

She shifted again. She'd probably wake up soon? We had two days to go until the reinforcements arrived. With the traps set up all we had to do was sit and wait.

I watched Petra.

She had said she lived in Ouleid, right? Door II of some building, so it was probably some kind of apartment. Did she live alone? Probably, or with Falida. How would her room look? Imagine it. What did she furnish it with? What furniture...

Who was Petra?

Sweat stuck us together melted marshmallows but she laced her fingers slowly through mine, one, two, index, middle, ring, pinky through holes one, two, three, and wrap around, and she squeezed! Squeezed tightly, Wayfarer... and slowly she drew her hand out. She released it, my hand. (I fell onto the floor.)

"Did you sleep well," she whispered.

Yeah, I almost said, but my breath caught in my throat. No... No, "Y-Yeah," I said.

Yeah, I did.

"I'm really glad," said Petra. "Tehe."

I didn't know how to react, so I just watched her.

"What's that face for?"

"Um," I began. "I'm just kind of happy," I stopped.

"You're happy," said Petra.

"I haven't decided yet," I said, trying to make it clear, "but I'm happy that I'm in this tent right now. I'm happy that you decided to offer it to me to sleep in. I'm happy, happy ..."

She was quiet. She turned, so she was no longer on her side, but on her back, looking up into the top of the tent. I slowly did the same.

"I'm happy that—you exist—" I stopped, closed my eyes. Pulled a breath in. What was that? "I'm really happy! I lost my arm and I'm so happy," I grimaced, grimace-smiled, pulled in a breath. "I'm happy because—b—because of you," I exhaled, took in another breath, saccades staccato, kept my eyes closed. (I'm so happy.)

I felt Petra's breath hot on my face and I knew that she was there. I kept my eyes closed. Her breath mingled with mine. Warmth intensified. And ...

She dug her arms under my body and brought me up, raised me from my prone position, she was sitting? I opened my eyes—she buried her head into my neck. She hugged me tightly.

"Don't cry," she said.

Was that what I was doing?

Ah!

I was crying. I could feel it now. It had been so long, hadn't it? Ah. "Ah—."

Tears ran down my face and stained Petra's robes, a whole new layer of it, red to red to red. Petra hugged me tighter. I cried.

"Don't cry," Petra whispered.

"I—I don't want to," I said.

"Well, can't you? Can't you stop crying? It does make me a little sad..."

"It's good crying," I said. "It's really—hhhk—really good! I'm," I trailed off, choked a bit.

"Okay," said Petra.

It's okay if you cry, Wayfarer. It's totally okay! You're safe now, and you've made your first friend. You've found someone, a type of relationship you've never ever been able to have before. You're real now. This matters.

"I'm sorry," said Petra.

"The only thing you have to be sorry for is making me happy," I said. I was stopping, now. I was trying to stop myself from crying. Could I? Couldn't I?

"Um..."

"Sorry! I'm so sappy! I'm so sappy right now. I'm sorry, Petra. I don't mean to force myself on you or anything. I'm sorry,"

"F-Falida says that I'm the one hugging you, okay, so you can't be sorry! You aren't allowed to be! I'm the one that should be sorry! You shouldn't be sorry."

When you say Falida, how often does that sentiment come from Falida in truth?

"Okay, I'll try not to be," I almost said sorry. "I'll try."

She released me and pushed me back, gripping me by the shoulders and looking into my face said: "Good! So try, Wayfarer! Try! You have to try, okay!!"

"O—okay," I said. "Okay! I'll try, Petra! I'll try!"

It's okay if you cry, Wayfarer, but don't be sorry.

We exited the tent after a bit. We didn't do anything, so get your mind out of the gutter! Wienlie, his gang, and Rudolf (I guess Rudolf was technically part of Wienlie's gang?) stood or sat or variously loitered in the center of the camp. Petra and I approached.

"Sunder watches," said Wienlie. I wasn't so impressed with the way he talked and carried himself. He lounged next to the fire, leaned back on that floating zweihander. He was casual, and

laconic in the way he spoke. He didn't match with the person I had expected from Rudolf and Petra's descriptions, and it frustrated me somehow.

"Huh?"

"We're too strong at this moment for Sunder to move in on us. Varim's traps too discourage him. But Sunder watches."

"Ohhh! He's waiting for a total moment of weakness! If we give him an opening he'll totally devastate us..."

"Yes," said Wienlie.

"But he won't move in right now," I said. "Because he isn't sure he can win. He doesn't have another Sundered Acolyte like the rider, does he?"

"Nope," said Wienlie. "One of his only other Sundered Acolytes, of two, is far away from here. The second... is close, but not of any worry. I could see her on the other side of the ring last night," (he winked, tapped the right eyelid) "a massive houseki. Nowhere near us."

"Like Falida?" I said.

"Mhm," Petra confirmed.

"I see," I said. "So since he doesn't have something that strong he'd have to rely on his monsters. And he doesn't..."

"Doesn't trust his critters to take us on," said Rudolf.

"Haha," I said. "Yeah."

"So we wait," said Wienlie. "But Sunder watches. Best to be aware of that."

"You're telling us..."

"Sayin' to be cautious."

"I'm soo cautious... Falida's smart, so she wouldn't lead me wrong?"

"Um, I'll try."

"Tyehahehahehehehe! Who's chittering? Are we having a conversation? Chattering about? Yes?"

I turned. Varim. There was something about his manner of speech that made him come off strange. Was it forced? Certainly it was kind of outlandish... and even though Petra was eccentric, she wasn't like Varim. I greeted him nonetheless with a wave and a short smile. Petra curtsied. Rudolf gave him a rude gesture.

"Yes, Varim," said Wienlie. "We're having a conversation about Sunder. He's watching, so be cautious. Don't disarm your traps. They're in good locations."

"I can be veeery cautious," said Varim. He sniffed, dug into his bag, produced a strip of dry meat, gobbled it. "Veeeeery..."

He wandered away. I shrugged.

"That's all," said Wienlie. "Loiter as you like. We have some time."

I turned to Rudolf. "Hey, Rudolf."

"Eh?"

"There's one more person who was with us before we met Wienlie," I said.

"Oho," said Rudolf. "He's alive! Not dead. Barely—but Falida is strong, and Wienlie's healer patched him right up."

"Let's go see Eric, then," I said.

Petra took my hand. Rudolf stood—the three of us ventured forward.

"Hey," I said to Eric. He rested on his back against the wall of the tent, sweaty. A white bandage was wrapped around his gut—but there was no blood. He had healed. Fighting the rider in the end was the right decision.

"You," said Eric.

"Me," I said.

"I bet you thought it was funny," said Eric.

"What?"

"I bet you thought seeing me with a hole in my chest like that was funny," said Eric.

"I didn't," I said. "Well, I couldn't have, even. I was blacked out. I, wait, look at my arm! Look! I have no arm! That's the rider's fault! And the healer isn't strong enough to fix it!"

"..."

"Do you have a problem with me?" I said. I looked to my side but both Petra and Rudolf had decided to loiter on the backline. 'Ummm, Wayfarer, I'm taking the position of principled neutrality?' "Do I just make people develop problems with me? Is that just my ambient aura?"

"..."

"..."

"You could never understand me but that's not a feature specific to you. You're just a symptom like everyone else."

What was I supposed to say? God you're so fucking chuunibyou? I bit back a reply and looked away, slightly offended. I didn't like being reduced to a tiny part of a whole...

"So no. It's not really a problem with you."

"It's a problem with the world," I said.

"It's a problem with the world," confirmed Eric.

"What is your problem," I said. "You have a family to get back to? That's all I know about you. You know, to operate well within a group, you can't have issues with everyone else. And if we're going to survive the incursion even with reinforcements we need to operate well as a group."

"Personally I don't think it really matters that much," said Eric. "What do you actually do in a fight?"

"That's not fair at all," said Petra, defensively. Neutrality pact violated? Nations at war...

"It's true," I said. "My contribution in the rider fight can't really be proven to be anything but a fluke. That's the only fight I've even been sorta helpful in thus far. So he's right."

"Is your goal with this to prove that you really are somehow better than average? Humbler and fairer than I thought you were?"

"Kinda," I admitted.

"I can tell," said Eric.

"Okay dude holy shit," I said.

"Yeeep," said Eric. He coughed.

"Stop baiting me please," I said. "It just really is not good to be adversarial to people even if you have a problem with the whole entire world. Please. Wienlie would agree?" Wouldn't he? I looked questioningly at Rudolf and Petra. Petra shrugged, Rudolf looked awkwardly away. (That's right, Rudolf himself had a problem with being adversarial around people for no reason ... as did I ... well, as did Petra, actually, so...)

"What are you here for," said Eric. "I'm recovering to rejoin Wienlie's side."

"I wanted to," I paused.

Eric watched me.

I continued, finding the words: "I wanted to make sure you were okay, that's all."

Eric watched me.

Eric stared at me.

"What?"

Eric stared at me.

"Seriously, what?"

"I don't think he believes you," said Petra. "It's totally true, though!"

Eric said: "Are you two fucking."

Simultaneously "No," said I (I boggled, what? That would be really incomprehensible), "Yes," said Rudolf. I looked at him with betrayal. He looked questioningly back at me. ("Actual friendly fire?")

"But it is true," I said to Eric. "I didn't want you to die, even if I find you abrasive."

"Fine," said Eric. "It is a problem with you specifically."

"It was the only way you'd survive," I said.

"That doesn't make me feel better," said Eric. "It still hurt, and it was embarrassing and stupid. It was awful."

"What did you expect from a fight? That it'd be cool? That you'd be able to contribute even if you were totally useless? Maybe you'd take up a strategist position, sit back, enjoy the party, because you're naturally so-talented, just a total Sun Tzu, a war genius?"

"Like you?"

I stopped.

Eric laughed. "It's fine! It's whatever. I'm going to finish this incursion and then I return to my family."

"Ya bring em up a lot," said Rudolf.

"They're... on my mind a lot," said Eric.

"Is there a story to that?" I said.

"Get out of my fucking tent," said Eric.

Eric proved kind of inconsolable—at least by me. Petra stayed behind to tend to his Falida, though. That Falida could be split into two smaller chunks like that, each so strong... well, Eric really hated me! I was adversarial to him to begin with, I guessed, and then hurting him and embarrassing him like that...

It was necessary. That was all. The way he spoke before—it was like he had a bit of a protagonist complex? Like he thought of himself as a hero in a narrative. And I had undermined and humiliated him in a way that denied that. And so he hated me. That he lied or maybe thought himself that it was a problem with the whole world, the entirety of the world...

I shook my head. Well! Everyone had their burdens and tribulations. It wasn't my job to help everyone? I'd just stay away from him from this point onward.

Rudolf walked beside me.

"Eric really hates me," I said.

"Yup. But you saved him, so I don't. Maybe I have some reservations still about your fiber of character—but your core is solid, as far as I'm concerned. Ehe."

"That's nice," I said. "I don't want Eric to hate me, though."

"Too much bad stuff's happened in that boy's life," said Rudolf. "He hurts for everything, and is hurt by everything. You saw how angry he was. You don't get so angry without being hurt quite bad. I've gathered that he was hurt very bad."

"It's really ... yeah," I said.

"Give him faith," Rudolf suggested.

"I will," I said.

"..."

We walked. In a circuitous motion we made our way to the center of the camp. The rock roof Varim had grown (complete with dynamite!) overshadowed us suddenly, took us from the world of light into that of darkness.

"What happened, do you think?"

"Hm?"

"To Eric. Why Eric's like that."

"Ah. Ehe, well. His family is in a bad spot, I think. Poor. Shackled by debt, most likely. He thinks he can go back with all the strength and power he earns here, with all his allies—who of course see his inner virtue, without any steps toward becoming a better person he believes he'll grow his faction as if he's improving himself—he'll go back and cut off the tax collectors' heads."

"I hope he succeeds," I said.

"You want that boy to have goodwill," observed Rudolf.

"I really do," I said.

"You badly dislike making enemies," observed Rudolf.

"I really do," I said.

"Well," said Rudolf. "I'm sure he—"

Wienlie's voice came: "Cohort! In guard positions! There's movement in the forest, and the moon smells fire and brimstone!"

Brimstone. Brimstone. Brimstone—hell. Demons.

"Shit," said Rudolf. "Wayfarer, you know what demons are?"

"I know what demons are," I said.

Petra came hurrying up behind us. I looked around—saccades staccato. "I don't have a sword."

"It wouldn't be useful for you," said Rudolf. Right. My arm. I bared my teeth, grimacing.

"We'll have to hope they're not hostile," said Petra, breathing heavily. She had been running. Petra wasn't very fit or tough.

"What's your mana like," I said to Rudolf.

"High, but brimstone is a negator," he replied. "It isn't a good strategy to rely on anything magical. Or anything preternatural at all."

"Preternatural," I said.

"The preternatural powers are the powers above natural ordained as ours by the Engine," replied Petra. "Above the preternatural powers are the supernatural powers. Brimstone is one such power."

"So we're screwed," I said.

"We're screwed if the demons decide to fight us," said Rudolf.

"No," said Petra. "We can totally wound them enough to send them back to Jahime. The question is how much are we willing to bet? How much are we willing to lose?"

"Nothing," said Rudolf.

"I'm willing to lose it all if that's what it takes," I said.

"Only one of you two will win anything at all in life," said Petra. "Wayfarer has the right of it! If you want to succeed, you have to do whatever it takes. Extinguish whichever little flame of the heart you must..."

I turned to look for Wienlie and his gang. They were conferring in a circle. I nodded to Petra and Rudolf.

"We can't stand around talking."

"Ummm, the demons aren't near, are they?"

"Likely only visible by the moon," confirmed Rudolf. "Wienlie wouldn't have let them sneak up on us so close."

"We have time, then," said Petra. "They'll wander around before they find us. But they will find us... they have a sense for finding living things."

"I really don't want to have to fight demons," I said.

"Ehe. Well, depends on how strong they are how screwed we get," said Rudolf. "And also how many!" finished Petra.

"God," I said.

"I feel the same," said Rudolf.

"Let's talk to Wienlie," I said.

Rudolf and Petra nodded.

012 / rudder rotary

Rudolf was right. The movement in the forest Wienlie had described was occurring several miles off from us. Regardless, it was a dangerous signal? A totally unknown third party, certainly stronger than the beasts Sunder had here, interjecting themselves into the situation. It meant that Wienlie's plan had a lower chance of going off without a hitch.

"Assumin' we don't have visual on the demons themselves," said Rudolf.

"We do not," replied Wienlie. "Only the flame and brimstone from their entrance into this reality."

"Figured! Well, umm, what are we going to do?"

"We're going to get ready," said Wienlie. "Demons use brimstone. Our artifacts, abilities, and magic will each ordinarily be of no use. But there is a solution to the problem of brimstone."

Petra smiled. "If we must, we'll kill the demons before they have opportunity to even send it out! That's the solution, isn't it? We layer up so many traps and ready so many spells and fires all at once, and kill them the moment they step forward."

"Yep," said Wienlie. "Straightforward. There's only one path in and out of this camp. Sunder watches. And I'm sure the demons will find their way there as well."

"What if they defeat the three traps Varim placed elsewhere?"

Wienlie looked at me.

"Well ..."

"Look, the way I see it, is... if they come in via an alternate entrance through the ruins, they trigger Varim's traps, but those are too weak to kill demons, I assume? So they're a no-go, no luck. The traps trigger, we're left without, and we have demons in the middle of our camp. It's a bad position to be in. But we have the option, with our light, to lure them into our chosen entrance, exposing our location and yes making certain that we'll have an encounter with demons but simultaneously ensuring us a much stronger tactical position as a result."

Wienlie shook his head. "If they approached from the side, or from the air, they'd find our camp. Think in three dimensions. Your plan isn't good."

"We take Falida from the center of the camp and spread her around the ruins, a single super-thin line ready to lash out and decapitate anything that comes near. And, er... I guess we have no way to safeguard the air?"

"My zweihander, but it would be affected by brimstone."

"So we don't," I said. "That's fine. What are the chances?"

"Low but never zero," said Wienlie.

"So what's our plan in the other case," I said. "Sit pretty and hope they come near? If they approached our camp *anyway* it'd more likely be from the side. If we accept they'll find us anyway with some innate sense of life, and it seems like everyone's accepted that already—then we have to accept that luring them is a better plan by however much."

There was a female voice to my side—deep, definitely a chest voice, though with mellow, fine resonance. "Wienlie. Boy."

I turned. It was the woman with the dial on her head. She was taller than me and had wrapped around her left hand a long chain, which continued around her forearm, and plunged into a large box at her back. The chain swerved down from her hand toward her hip where it was attached to a long harpoon.

"This is Sartaca," Wienlie introduced me.

"Hi, I'm Wayfarer," I said pleasantly.

She glanced at me oddly, then—"We be—making plans?" She pronounced plans like 'plahns.'

"We are," replied Wienlie. "Ah. Actually! Wayfarer, your plan might well work, with Sartaca's power!"

"It's a power," I started,

"The type of ability brimstone works least against are the odd, reality-bending ones. The ones resembling Spatial. Only for one reason—" he glanced at me—"It requires skin contact with the possessor of the ability."

"Sartaca, what's your power?"

"I am a hunter," hunter like 'hoonter,' "You see the harpoon at side? Yes. I make all straight line. I make things forget line. Harpoon penetrates. Gory kill."

"I'm not sure I understand," I said.

"What is word. Cylinder? In cylinder all things stay themselves. Yet. They come closer. At once themselves and mixed. Border on walls. Nothing notices border on walls. But they come closer. Must move forward or backward."

"I see," I said. "Okay. We place Sartaca behind us and trap the demons in a line."

Wienlie nodded. "Then they only have one avenue of entrance."

"We have to lure them here, though," I said.

"We could use our light."

"But are we sure we want to do that?"

"We aren't."

"Who'll make that call?"

"Me," said Wienlie.

"Is there anything…?"

"You've made your case," said Wienlie. "I have to think about it."

"Petra would have some words with you about that," I said.

"Huh?"

"Nothing," I said. "Alright."

I turned. I was going to leave—as Wienlie had said, I had made my case? It was a transparent fuck-off type of phrase, and I wasn't interested in arguing it that hard. I knew fundamentally Wienlie had been persuaded. If nothing else I think he believed the demons really would find us anyway.

"Wait," said Wienlie.

I looked back at him—he had caught my single arm with his hand.

"You have to understand, Wayfarer," said Wienlie. "I don't want to die."

I stared into his eyes. I saw the first emotion I had seen there besides base pleasure since I had met him. Sincere fear.

"I don't want to fight demons. I fear there is a great chance we might. I want you to be prepared to die. I want you to be prepared for me to die. I want you to be prepared for anyone here to die."

"Be hunter," said Sartaca. "Hunter unafraid of death."

"Anyone here like Petra," said Eric, who had stalked or shifted or stealthed into view, short gangling body held together healed wrong. "Haha."

"What," I said, "the fuck," turning around, instantly honestly quite pissed?

"Eric," said Wienlie. I looked at Petra for support. She looked away. Was she just going to let him say that stuff?

"... Sorry," said Eric to Wienlie.

"Can you seriously please just," I stopped. I couldn't tell people to kill themselves. That was very mean. "Please just drop it," I said.

"Let's step away, kid," said Rudolf, who grabbed my arm and Petra's and ushered us both out of that group formation. We walked step, step, step, fifteen steps and fifteen more until we were behind a tent—he released us.

"He makes me really upset," I said.

"A lot of people make you upset," said Rudolf. I looked at him, baffled.

"Petra, why didn't you say anything?"

Petra shifted a bit on the balls of her feet. Silence. A beat passed.

"Petra?"

"Well," she said, then stopped.

Rudolf watched. "You two aren't, are you?" he said.

"No, yeah," I said. "We aren't. We aren't," I paused.

"Rudolf, could you step off to the side for a moment?" said Petra. "Preferably outside of earshot."

Rudolf's mouth creased into a line but respectfully he nodded, bowed, and made his exit. Crunch, crunch—the sound of his boots fading away. Petra looked deep into my eyes.

"It's sometimes hard to tell people no..." she said.

"It is," I said. "I feel like you don't have a problem with it."

"Well... I don't think it'd be anything to be ashamed of, so I'm okay with the group thinking that about us," said Petra.

"It's not true, though," I said.

"Emotionally it is?"

"What does that mean," I said.

"Well," said Petra. "I, um... I don't know about you, but, um..." she stopped, then continued—"If..."

I stared at her. She stepped forward to me and looked up, up, up:

"If you had tried to fuck me there and then I wouldn't have minded at all," she whispered.

I froze. My eyes drifted up, up, up: they settled on the horizon. I felt my heartbeat. I felt my breathing. I wasn't sure what signals I was giving her through my body but I wasn't sure I needed to be sure. I was frozen, completely, utterly—petrafied?

"What about," said Petra, "*you?*"

I swallowed. I was conscious of my Adam's apple. Maybe it would spear out of my throat like a monstrous demarcation of my inner monstrosity and kill everyone before the demons or Sunder got their chance? I swallowed again.

"Um," I paused. "I wouldn't have," I paused again. "Minded. I didn't want to use you. Don't want to use you. Don't want that to change anything."

"So emotionally," said Petra.

"Can we," I closed my eyes and swallowed again. "Can we stop talking about this?"

"... Sorry..." said Petra. She stepped away. Death receded. "Sorry."

"Sorry," I said. "Sorry, it's my bad. I should be an adult about this. I'm sorry." I inhaled finally. "I... I."

I closed my eyes.

"I have a fetish for a group of people back in the world I came from. Um. God. I need to be out with it, even if you don't know

what it means—I had, have, an Asian fetish. You know what a fetish is, right? It's a philia, it's something illicit. It's gross to fetishize people. It happens anyway, because I don't think you can control it. And so for a while I promised myself that because the only way to be free of it was to, was to get into a relationship with someone *I could fetishize,* I would have to do that. But I was convinced I'd never be able to because I'm me. Because I have this fetish yes but because of all the other factors that make Wayfarer Wayfarer. So eventually I decided that I shouldn't be with anyone ever because inevitably I'd hurt them. Because of this fetish, and because I'm just, generally a person who hurts other people, not in the most horrible ways but in pretty horrible ways." I stopped. "I don't have this fetish for you. Even if I feel feelings for you which I'm still working out I won't have this fetish for you."

Petra watched me.

"And *even if that didn't matter,* I would hurt you. It seriously, seriously isn't you, it's me. I don't *want* to reject you. But you're giving me all this closeness and your body and love and I don't know what to do. I want it. But I shouldn't use you for this stuff. It's totally gross. And that's what I'm doing by allowing you to get close to me."

I opened my eyes. "Just, understand, okay, I do want to have sex with you. Okay? Do you understand? Alright! The fact that you want that too is seriously really insane to me! But I would be using you if I did. The relationship would be uneven. I have no interest in having sex with friends, I don't ever want to mix relationship types like that. And so I'm left in this awful gray spot that I can't figure out. I'm forced to conclude that I'm using you to make myself feel better about myself without ever

committing to you like I *should*. Do you understand, Petra? I have an Asian fetish."

She regarded me.

"I understand," she said.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Um..." she stopped.

"Sorry," I said again.

"I'm gonna think about it," she stopped. "I do really like you..."

"Thank you," I said. "I don't really like myself right now. If you could just avoid compliments, that'd be ..."

"Um..." she stopped.

"Sorry," I said, for the third time, or the thirty thousandth time.

She turned to the side, dawdled.

"You can go," I said. "Sorry."

"I—It's okay," she said. "You're..."

She inhaled—and walked away as fast as she could.

I took a shaky breath in.

It was getting painful...

"Varim. Va*rim*." And who could it have been but Sartaca? Tyehahaha! His ears pricked. Chaotically as if he was a top wibbling-wobbling down its last days he stumbled over beside her, fell, almost, on her solid body, her solid body like a pillar.

She pronounced his name like Va-*reem*—but it was *Va*-reem! He shook his head, as much as he could, uncivilized, ohhh, no?

"Varim. This throws wrench into plans, does it not?"

"Ehhh? What? A wrench? No! Nonono. Not any more than normal, nooo, tyaha. Of course plans go wrong! But the nature of it—heightened stakes, eer, that is—yes, that is normal! That is, if we failed we would have died anyway, yes? Death is the worst thing that can happen! We must stick to our plan. We must."

Sartaca grimaced. She was built like a square. Square body, square face. Square nose. Her eyes were squares. She certainly wasn't so square when it came to the law, Varim thought to himself. He giggled.

"What?"

"Nothing, nothing!" Raising his hands as a train crossing, ding-ding, you know: for his hands to be visible he had to fully raise them all the way he could! His body was that ratlike.

"What. Serious. Varim..."

"It's serious nothing!" It wasn't mockery! If he decided to, tahaha, engage with her on her level, that wasn't mockery, couldn't be... it's serious nothing! It's serious not mockery! Tyehahahakakaka!

She moved. Suddenly she stood up and just as grim as she was sudden she punched him in his protruding gut. Varim doubled over, wheezing; she grabbed at his neck, but he had none. His head was so thoroughly integrated into his hunchback body.

"Teh! Teh, stop it! Stop! Stop!"

"Stop it," she said it as *eet*. "Say it Varim. Stop it! Stop it with your very own voice. Say it Varim. Go ahead and say it. Say it wrong Varim."

The indignity! The despair! Stop it, Varim, you know Varim, he almost said it even, but he remained silent, as a regal king would, a rat king? He smiled a smug smile and she pushed him backwards onto the ground.

Sartaca overlooked Varim face thrown almost in shadow. What was visible: her gleaming eyes. She looked sourly down at him.

"Do not antagonize me Varim. Or I kill you."

Varim was silent. Impudent he tried to laugh but found he couldn't. Instead he coughed.

"Let us discuss what I call you to discuss."

"Aaah. Tah. Yes. Fine. Yes. It will not be an issue. We will endure. We will persist. We will breach and—"

"The demons Varim. What could the demons be here for. Surely not our Laetitia. Surely not Varim."

"Laetitia has no problem with demons. Laetitia doesn't meddle with that. Sartaca. Sartaca come here. Sartaca," he moved forward, lunged, groped at her ankles square, her shins square, her broad blocklike body, pulled himself up—she remained a pillar—he begged at her knees like a disciple, adoring, "Listen, Sartaca," he said. "Listen. You want things from this deal yes? Yeees? If we capture Laetitia then those Ruceumontes will give you these things, yes? We are already in this ring? Then we must capture Laetitia? 'Risk be damned,' Sartaca, risk be damned, as you humans say, yees? We must capture Laetitia, you agree?"

Sartaca stared down, regarded him. "I agree, Varim," she finally said. "We continue. On your head if we fail. Ruceumontes trust me more than rat-man. And do not antagonize me Varim."

Or I will keel you repeated Varim under his breath. He clung to her before finally he let himself fall on the ground, on all fours.

She nodded. Yes, that was right. She nodded, was satisfied. He sniffed and maybe he smelled the smell of whales. Sartaca was not from any of the three great nations; rather she was from the second ring, a band of humans that was allowed through the first ring, through Sunder's great mercy... they were barbaric. Whale-hunting had been illegalized except in the case of monstrous whales, free game for any hunter. Sartaca was a whale-hunter.

And do not antagonize me, Varim.

013 / crop harvester

"Tzu. Tzu. Look at this. Look, I'm working on a new race for the server."

"... Maracts...?"

"Yeah! The skill tree is team based and stuff. I figured since there was no bug race..."

"I see,"

"They're built around Crowdfunding, which gives them a pool of drawable points depending on the number of people in their hive. And, and so, the other thing they do is inflict poisons, and those get stronger with more people in the hive too. That's the capstone skill."

"Oh, yeah,"

"Well, anyway, look at the graphics. I'm, doing it in Google Sheets, cos it's better. For looks."

"It's kinda slow."

"Well, it looks better."

"Yeah."

"I love you."

"Aahaha, thank you..."

Wienlie had decided. It was certain. At some point he had stopped clutching at his face and he had marshalled all of us, rallying. Eight plus four plus Falida, so thirteen people total. His face was solemn. Eveningtime light filtered through verdant leaves above and the ruins around us were as silent as they were stony.

Face deadened dead dead like a corpse or a demon he began. "We will lure the demons with our lights to the areas with no traps. Sartaca, you will lock them into a line with your ability, straight to us. We will attempt to talk with the demons and obtain their word that they will not kill us. But the rest of us must prepare to attack them. There seem to be ..."

"Well?" demanded the elf-girl to my right. She wore a tiara, and carried herself regally. How imperious.

"There are two demons," said Wienlie. "From the size of the portal's remains."

"How strong are they?" I said.

"There isn't a way to know," said Wienlie. "Besides fighting them, of course. You understand what makes a demon, yes?"

I didn't know what he meant by that. The physical parts constituting a demon? Obviously they varied. I didn't even know what fundamental material demons were composed of; that had never come up. They disappeared when they died, that was all? So it couldn't have been normal matter... agh! I was getting ahead of myself. Obviously he was offering with that question to tell me the answer if I just asked.

"I don't," I said, shaking my head.

"The conceptual control," replied Wienlie in a teacherly tone.

"Oh," I said. That was all?

"Yes. Demons have one or more, er... sentences, in plain Ouleidan, which describe attributes of the concept under their control. If you took the Windows demon, maybe you could say one of its sentences—one of its *vows*—is that windows are bounded by a frame."

"I see," I said. "What can this do?"

"Demons can spend their own power to enforce their vows on reality," said Wienlie. "Probably the most common instance you'll come across is enchantment, where one of their vows is applied to something that isn't the centerpiece of the vow."

"Gotcha," I said. "Like, if the vow was fire burns, you could make it so that something else burned."

"Yes," said Wienlie. "And since they're in Ouleidan, they can be exploited. *Burns,* in your example, could be read as being burnt itself, *on fire,* or lighting other things on fire, or scorching them, or... you understand?"

It seemed simple enough. Demons were different in the server; a lot more oriented around vibe and aesthetic—the demon of something could summon something, or had powers related to that something, but they were never so ironclad as a couple of sentences describing the facets of that something. I nodded.

"Good," said Wienlie shortly. "The upside is that their vows are revealed when they're used. The downside is that their vows are revealed when they're used. To level the odds Archmage Jaunt hundreds of years ago created a great book, and enchanted it to record the vows of demons seen by human eyes. It's very rare that a vow isn't in this book."

"Do you have the book, though?" I said.

"A copy," grinned Wienlie. "Magically enchanted, as many pages as it needs to be able to store all those vows."

"Really good," I said. "Yes. Okay, awesome. So we have to identify the demons in question."

Wienlie nodded. "That's a task for when we meet them. I just wanted to make sure you understood what demons could do to you, so it wasn't a shock."

"Gotcha," I said.

"Alright," said Wienlie. "Are we ready?"

Sartaca, Varim, Petra, Rudolf, everyone else, and I, all of us nodded affirmatively. No matter what, right? We'd face them and we'd triumph over this adversity, and then we'd return to Clockwork, crowned with laurels. The danger...

Eric broke away.

"I'm going to hide," he said.

Wienlie gazed at him. Was that a hint of betrayal in his eyes? Wienlie's posture slumped slightly and he leaned forward as if he was going to chase after Eric. But he didn't. "Why so?" he called. Eric stopped in his tracks.

"My family needs me home safe," he said, finally. Do you remember? I didn't choose Truthseeker... so I couldn't distinguish between truth and lies. Remember what Stellar said? Truthseeker's the better 18-cost trait. Maybe it was. Maybe it wasn't good to be able to remember anything at all; what mattered more...

I didn't choose Truthseeker, so I wasn't able to tell if that was all it was. But I felt like it was half-true. I felt that way, so I resolved to believe it.

Eric disappeared. The rest of us turned back. Petra held in her hands, attached, floating—no, held up by a dozen little tiny microscopic strands—Falida, in crystal ball form. She tilted her head, avoided my gaze, and smiled slightly at Wienlie. The crystal ball orbited in place.

"Slit your hands," said Petra. Wienlie produced a knife. Red blood splattered down one, two, eleven—all but Falida and Eric. I winced, grimaced slightly as it cut across my palm. And Falida greedily absorbed it (vampire!).

Falida began to glow.

"Into positions," said Wienlie. "Get ready."

We nodded each of us and fell back. Petra holding the vampire stone aloft raised it up up up and Wienlie came into place beside her. His zweihander buried itself in the foliage. Light shone! The world was illuminated. Petra and Wienlie's faces were cast glowing, illuminated, angular angles, and Wienlie opened his hand, cautioning... and Sartaca took her place behind the two of them, steadied her body.

The light shone outward; I gripped the sword nearly weightless in my single sweating hand. I hadn't held a real sword before this world; I finally understood what people meant when they talked about a well-weighted blade. It felt right...

"Are they coming," I said in the twilight zone behind the three of them.

"Quiet," said Wienlie. We waited, tense.

The glow spread and spread so far. Trees cut chunks from the light, illustrated blackness in negative space; ink-painting. Brush over it all and affix your signature now.

Two shapes appeared in the not. Wienlie closed his fist; instantly a pulse from Sartaca thrummed outward and what was different? I couldn't immediately tell but I knew something was different and all—all of us grew just a bit more anxious. Regardless the two shapes walked side-by-side; they came into focus and the light. Was that really necessary, though? They both had lanterns at their hip anyway.

"W-what? Why do those demons have *lanterns?*" the elf-princess at my side furrowed her brow, placed her hand on the rapier at her belt. She leaned forward, stared. Wienlie stepped forward past Petra whose light slowly began to fade. Click, click, click; each of Wienlie's gang reached down to their hips and turned on their own lanterns—at the elf-princess' I was able to see it more closely; drawn by something a little stone floated up, began to spin, illuminated.

"What's weird about that?" I whispered to her. She tilted her head at me, caught my gaze—*"Mhmph."*

Alright, then, I thought, turned my head away, focused on the demons. The first and the taller, at nine feet, thereabouts, was a woman, with white hair; her body was covered only by green strips—vines? Flowering grapes grew grew puckered and popped, slowly, continually, as if she was boiling. She met my gaze—plucked a grape from her vines—tossed it into her mouth and chewed it.

I looked away, then at the smaller one beside her. A large mouth, with prominent teeth, walking on two legs, with two

arms—each a little longer than I'd like a human's to be. The mouth hung open, slavered; there was no young. Instead—I squinted—at the tonsils in the back, there hung two glittering eyes.

The taller one looked around. She raised a hand—grapes grew on her fingers, exploded; their remnants flew and flew and flew into the sides but the sides were the sides of a constructed pocket dimension, and they slowed and slowed because they were getting closer and closer, and they fell. The taller one nodded. I sucked in a breath. She knew what was happening, had had the same sense I had, Sartaca was wrong when she described her ability?

"*Sartaca,*" I hissed. "She *noticed*."

"Was wrong," Sartaca said tersely. "Sue. Whales do not notice."

The demons stood. So we were at a standstill. They wouldn't approach, but they couldn't get around us to the sides. They didn't want to approach, either—they didn't want to be surprised. Maybe they would send out a brimstone attack now, and we'd die. Had we miscalculated?

"Salutations," said Wienlie.

The female demon stepped forward.

"Your traaap was ill-planned!"

"It was not a trap," said Wienlie. "We didn't want you to get into the center of our camp. That is all."

"Ohohoho," from the female demon. "And why's that?"

"Historically, encounters between demons and the People have been violent," replied Wienlie. "I wish to minimize casualties, that is all. Give me your word."

"Ohhhh? My woooord?" she raised her eyebrow.

"Yes," replied Wienlie. "That you will not attempt to harm physically spiritually socially or any other way, will not attempt to harm *any one* of the People within a hundred meters of this location."

"I will not give my word," said the female demon.

"Why is that," said Wienlie.

"I have not decided yet," she lowered her posture, down, down, and she was finally at eye level with Wienlie: "Whether or not I shall kill you!" And with that fearsome smile she tilted her head slashing through to the left—Wienlie jumped just slightly. But it was enough, wasn't it? An indication of fear.

"Aha... calm down?" said Petra, tilted her head, confident now. Her confidence wasn't reassuring—treating demons like this didn't make me feel completely safe at all. "There's no need to threaten us," she continued, sweetly. "After all ultimately us all are all allied against the maleficence of Sunder. We weaken our own forces here on this ring by infighting. Soo, ummm, let's consider not fighting, and instead we might discuss. What are you two here *for?* It's not often demons tunnel out of Hell to meet with the People, right?"

The female demon looked at Petra, seemed a little bit... turned-off by her; maybe Petra's peacemaking was accidentally occident to the demon's Eastern sensibilities; perhaps Petra's peacemaking was counterintuitive and served only to worsen

the demon's true mood... but it was the case that Wienlie was no longer threatened. So it seemed Petra had made the right call, to some degree or another.

"We're looking... for an escaped one of ours," said the demon.

"One of yours?" I said quietly. The female demon glanced at me but Wienlie quickly took over the conversation, diverting attention from me, I thought—"What's one of yours mean?"

I was an unknown factor; I understood why.

The female demon closed an eye—winked, yes, she winked!—and smiled a nasty smile. "Ohoho! I am Grape, and this is Gnash; servants of the Santa Claws. And we are, of course, aha... *recollection agents* for lost souls at *Carnegaesima's largest artifact farm*."

She enunciated each word cleanly, powerfully, with pride and straightened back; yes! Ramrod. She stood up into the sky like a lightning rod, attracting static discharge *bzzzt!* I sucked a breath in. Artifact farm? Farm. Was that...?

"Grape and Gnash," repeated Wienlie.

"Indeed," said the female demon. "Those are our names."

He slowly reached down to the book at his side...

"Pull out not that book but your weapon should you wish to threaten me," said the female demon. "They are equal signals of combat, but with only one of them may you strike back or block my blows, oho!"

Wienlie swallowed and removed his hand from the book. I grimaced. That wasn't good—we wouldn't be able to look up

Grape and Gnash's vows, then. I wondered if I could slip to his side and take the book, but... I would be too clearly in Grape's eyesight.

Grape. Gnash. Wait, Santa Claws?

I recognized that name. I sucked a breath in—Hell's worldbuilding was of course vague but we had run fights with demons in the server before. Santa Claws was, of course, the centerpiece of the second Christmas event. He was a jolly rendition of Santa Claws who could zip across the jags of radio waves; his main powers involved high-speed dimensional cutting, slashes with the nominal *claws*. It gave me a good picture of who I was dealing with—Santa Claws *wasn't all that strong*. So Grape and Gnash couldn't be that strong, either, right?

I grimaced. But it was likely *we* weren't that strong. Everyone else... well, for me to talk about this, I'm gonna have to get a little technical. So strap in.

Labyrinth Climbers was a powerscaling-oriented server. We used scaling charts that took us all the way up to the level where the characters would be able to easily destroy small islands in one blow; most characters hovered at building-level for the most part, where they would be able to, of course, destroy buildings with a hit.

We did this via stats and stat thresholds.

In a game like Dungeons and Dragons, each of your stats range from *basically* 10 to 20, and any stats beyond those numbers are pretty rare and act somewhat as character-distinguishing factors. Stat bonuses are calculated by subtracting 10 and dividing by 2 in Dungeons and Dragons. The thing with this is it

means the gap between someone with a 10 in one stat and a 20 in another stat is essentially a +5 bonus to a stat roll; D&D uses D20s, so... by far the majority of the effectiveness of your action comes from the *dice,* and the actual playing field of how large the stats are is so low it's not really like characters with big discrepancies in stats are at *that* much of a lopside with each other.

Labyrinth Climbers of course didn't use rolls. Labyrinth Climbers of course didn't have the stats range from 10 to 20 either. In Labyrinth Climbers there was no stat cap; stats could range from 0 to any number. They tended to hover at around 100-200 for most mid-level characters—which translated to building level in the scaling system of the server.

I mentioned before there were seven stats, right? Strength, power, agility, fortitude, magic skill, mana wellspring, durability. Starting at level one you obtained 30 stat points to allocate; every successive level, you gained by default 6 stat points to allocate between any of your stats. Do the math. With two or three stat pools to allocate between that doesn't seem like it should end up with discrepancies like 0-200 matchups between level 1 and level 10 characters, right?

Well. I mentioned before there was an easy way to pump up your Fortitude as a human. This came in the form of race skills. I can explain race skills more in-depth later, as they were the centerpiece of server buildcrafting—but it's enough to say that maxing out your race skills caused you to gain about 10 extra points per level, retroactively; so characters climbed exponentially numbers-wise until mid-level, because between early- and mid-level they were mostly just gaining new race

skills, which individually brought significant increases to their stats.

Santa Claws was meant to be an average demon, which meant his stats were somewhere in the hundreds. The way I had balanced him, though canonically the Christmas fight took place 8 years from where I believed I currently was, was that he had around three hundred points backing any given action he did. If Grape and Gnash were close to him, that meant I had a good picture of what their capabilities were.

The issue was I did not believe that any of my companions here were mid-level.

Rudolf had one spell. Falida was probably the closest to that, but Petra was a weak link, and Falida had already demonstrated the attacks she tried hardest with weren't the kind of stuff that could knock down whole *buildings*. Maybe, vaguely, walls at the most.

And I assumed Wienlie was close. I assumed everyone here was close.

Put simply, if we got into a fight with Grape and Gnash, we were screwed. I was confident that they *really were that strong,* even putting out of consideration their vow abilities.

I sucked in a breath. The conversation was still going. I tuned in.

"WE SEARCH FOR OURS!! INTO THE CAMP WE GO—*c-lick*—LET US INTO THE CAMP WE GO?? AND WE WILL SEARCH FOR OURS AND NONE WILL BE FOUND YES?? AND ALL WILL BE GOOD YES??"

Grape had stepped back. The voice was loud, shrill. It came from Gnash, from inside the massive jaw. I grimaced.

Then I realized.

"Fuck," I said. "Wienlie, Wienlie, I need to talk to you. Petra, distract. Wienlie."

Wienlie whipped around at me. "*What is it,*" he said urgently, the most force I had ever heard in his voice.

I grabbed at his head turned it—he struggled and then stopped, paused, because I had begun whispering.

I told him what I had realized.

All came to a stop.

"Ohoho? Are you considering our requ—"

Wienlie clenched his fist—the zweihander flew out and all hell broke loose.

014 / fullcolorworld

"I love you. I love you. You're so awesome. Why do you even talk to me? I love you. Why are you so nice to me? I'm sorry. I need you. Neeeed. I love you. Tzuuuu~ You're, so..."

"Cera..."

"I love you..."

"It's illegal..."

"I don't care,"

"... Thank you for saying that stuff."

"You should, love me too."

"Cera, I..."

"Tzu?"

"Um. I have to figure out everything. I don't think I feel the same way, but..."

"It's okay... I'll keep on loving you. I love you."

The world burst beautifully into color; wonderful-magical-miraculous-full-color. Tio-Schitona-te-Telemarsuna floated above the rest—she always did. Everyone was rushing at everyone else and she was soooo *totally certain* now, yes, it was certain, ordained, the *world was certain*—! It was certain that

SOMEONE WAS GOING TO DIE. There would be no backing down from a fight like this…

To be honest, Tio expected this. It wasn't like they'd get into a confrontation with fiendish demons like these and *not* fight. Especially with such inept squires and servants! Of her entire group perhaps only—no, not even Wienlie, not even then. Her entire group was of plodding fools. Internally she grimaced. Why did she have to get lumped in with people like *this?*

Movement, wow, … wow! With her hyper-enhanced wind elf agility senses Tio was one of the only people to perceive all absolutely everything of what happened next; do you want a rundown? Do you?

Well, let's wind back and zoom in, like private investigators on the cathode ray tube! Wienlie's attack came first in sequence, zweihander-guard's-hammer to E5! It spun arcing arcing circling around and around on its center—Grape suddenly had a dirk, parried, sparks flew, but it continued autonomous on to Gnash, took a chunk from the enamel. Simultaneously orange or green or red or blue spread around the boy, multicolored! Vampire! The rock dragged him off instantly, zooming away, same with Petra. (What had that boy even said to Wienlie, anyway?)

Sartaca charged. She was built like a tank after all; she slammed into poor leering Gnash, *schloop,* with hellfire zapping and zipping around them, lightning-on-fire, they both suddenly disappeared. What did that mean? Tio watched imperious. The zweihander came around and lunged toward Grape again. Her dirk was in the right hand, she quickly transferred it to the left and barely blocked the zweihander once more, scraping against it. Where was Wienlie? Tio looked around. Lingering white

lights surrounded them suddenly, yes—she turned back, there was Wienlie, he had fallen back but not fled. Surrounding him were those same will-o-the-wisp lights, pinpricks of hope in desolate perdition! So... Tio was in front? She gasped!

"A—hmph," she said, extended her leg and the slit at front of her dress exposed bare thigh: "**Adore my regal foot!**"

Yes. That was Tio-Schitona-te-Telemarsuna's granted ability. That was hers! "**ALL ADORATION PRINCESS**" was its name, one of the erstwhile thirteen thousand (really nine thousand). There were three phases to the ability, oh, um, you want to know? Mongrel! Wait and see...

Grape's bones splintered, her knees bent, she fell on the floor and bent down in supplication. Tio's foot was exposed in the sandal, necessary for next. Quickly Tio said, imperiously, "**Caress my regal foot!**"

Grape's face twisted, her arms came up, slowly, slowly, vines wrapping them, encircling them, her hands shook as she slowly, slowly lifted them towards Tio's foot. Tio grinned, her own face twisted, but in much the opposite way, yes, wasn't she so pathetic? Didn't it feel so good to humble a demon like this? Grape was so pathetic bent over Tio's foot like this, yes, her foot, the lowest part of the human body, most base, most animal, yes! Grape was so *pathetic* and it made Tio so *happy* somehow, she felt a fire within herself, yes... she giggled, but—

Vow: THORNS GROW FROM THE GRAPEVINE.

The vines encircling Grape's hands pulsed. Long long skewers exploded from them and impaled Tio's foot and ankles. Blood burst into the air and colored everything red, bones splintered—Tio screamed. She snarled, no, continue! Continue, she willed it

be, a halo surrounding her head illusory or maybe even real—it was like that story, yes, *Sir Penderbane's* so popular, Tio hated it—established norms set askew! Peasantry rebelling against nobility! Abolishment of the upper class, yes, Penderbane overthrowing and *overthrowing* and over*throwing* every regime he wandered across, yes, the reverse, the natural order, right of kings, God and all his host...! *Gah!!* Grape's thorns stabbed Tio's poor foot, the poor foot of a poor girl who had never done anything wrong, a birthday girl, don't look at her like that don't look at her like that, yes, don't look at her, just a poor girl, and still Grape caressed, caressed; her body fell apart, no, no, Tio tried to say it, tried to say—"K—K-K—"—and yet and yet and yet and yet and yet she was unable to, the vines crept up, slaughterous, onslaught, perihelion approaching, sanguine torturous, Tartarus, debt owed, or ouroboros, stuck THROUGH and THROUGH and THROUGH and THROUGH, Tio wailed, Penderbane, real-life Penderbane, of course this was what they meant when they said demons were impossible to fight, don't get into a fight with a demon, if you must fight a demon inspire your servants to arms in your place, yes, or force the demon into a vow; and Tio could not, Tio could not force Grape into a vow, COULD SHE? Her vineyard onslaught continued (a thousand micro and macroscopic holes papapapapapapapow!), Tio's knee popped. Sudden death—

"We should meet up in real life in two years. When we're both adults."

For sunny private Sunny Private death was not something to fear but to expect. Or that was what he told himself anyway as he drew his sword from its long sheath. Death was life's opposite, and life had such little beauty. Surely in that regard then there had to be something death held over life.

Steel of katana flashed vibrant. Sunny brought it to bear, leveled it. He had to be precise with his aim. That could be extended to life, couldn't it? To succeed in life you have to be precise in your aim. It isn't like the perfect life will fall totally in your lap just fine if you don't try to be precise with your aim. Tio's knee popped. He grimaced; time was running out. Closing time approached; the curtains would be drawn and all movement onstage would cease.

Sunny breathed out. Blood sprayed out suddenly. It wasn't Tio's. Grape's arm sloughed off. Still meat it dropped onto the floor with a heavy splat. Demons were made of the same stuff as the People—for a time. Then they would disappear into the thoughtstuff Hell was composed of; but that took hours. The scene was then of carnage on each side.

Grape whipped her head toward Sunny, but he wasn't there; he knelt on the other side, opposite where he began. He sheathed the katana, slowly stood, and looked at Grape with an affect of distance on his face. He wore a flowing black martial-arts suit; the white sash at his chest was bound tightly and divided his figure in two halves. He wondered about how he looked. In life, the appearance you present to another person is as important as the inside of your heart. What did Grape feel inside her own heart, seeing him? Seeing her rendered bloody and maimed like this… gave him confidence. Maybe it would all be okay.

Tio screamed and sobbed. She tried to pull her leg out but it was no use. Red spurted and spurted out; she was trapped. But Grape was injured and didn't seem to be healing. This was survivable! This wa

Vow: GRAPES GROW FROM THE GRAPEVINE

Thorns burst through Sunny's head, pow-pow-pow, obliterating his brain. He dropped like a puppet with his strings cut. Blood and gray matter decorated the ground; Grape stood behind him. Well, the second Grape did. After all, **GRAPES GROW FROM THE GRAPEVINE.** At Tio's knee still was the head-down hunkered-down armless corpse of the Grape demon. She had died spontaneously, but her body remained, a hundred thorns crisscrossing Tio-Schitona-te-Telemarsuna's leg all the way up to her knee.

"Ohoho! That's one," Grape said. Blood spread from headless Sunny Private and colored his dark robes red. What was happening anymore? Tio struggled, no, no! She couldn't die. She was stuck in this trap. She couldn't die. Please?

Grape stepped over the corpse. The stench of death filled the air. Vines slowly wrapped around her body, covered her new indecency. She regarded Tio. Varim in the back was paralyzed with indecision. Tio stretched herself, pled; "Varim," she said, staring, "Vaaaaaarim!! Varim, HEEEEEEELP MEEE," she said, elongating the vowels, her voice wore down and down and down. Tension crept into it, she choked, voice broke, faltered.

She looked away from Varim and there Grape was in front of her.

Varim stood and twitched. He had stood and twitched, that's all he had done for the duration of the fight. What was there to be done? He could lure Grape toward the pit trap but what would that do? They had talked about it before, right? With Wienlie. They didn't want to waste the traps on the demons, because traps so rudimentary wouldn't kill a demon. Grape had already changed to a different body once.

What was to be done...? His foot tensed.

"..."

"You're so, so, fucking, awful, you're so manipulative, you're... I didn't block you because you didn't, agree with me, I blocked you because I feel like a joke to you. You keep going around circles around what I say whenever you want and I LIKE it when you correct me I just don't want you to, fucking, say something to derail it all and make me look like I'm, like I'm,"

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to say stuff that made you feel that way."

"..."

"..."

"It's nothing now. It's, whatever. It's."

A challenger hurtled onto the field. Red and orange and all other iridescent colors blurred together into a kaleidoscopic mess; Petra held her hands up and the microscopic-thin strands pulsed again. Falida smashed into the elf and the world went

white, black, and red. Then she arced back, boomerang, skittering spider-legs autonomous shell body mode engage!

Blood decorated the ground; more than there was already seemed impossible. I wanted to puke seeing the ninja's corpse like that but that would be no use so I averted my gaze. Falida settled beside us, dropped the elf—her leg had been severed at the knee, and Falida held her blood inside so she didn't die.

"Tio's probably going into shock..." (So that was her name...)

I looked around, eyeballs chasing the scene—where had Grape gone—Wienlie stood, shuddering, his hands dragged aloft into the air by the will-o-the-wisps of his blade; I could see his back, fuck, fuck fuck fuck, what had happened? Was he incapacitated...? I looked around, and finally I saw Grape, and I saw another Grape.

Both were inert.

Under my foot I felt a pulse. I looked down and saw a thin green vine wrapped around my foot. I clumsily brought my sword down on it, skimmed my skin, blood sprayed out and the vine was half-severed, it began to clench around my foot, I did it *again* and gritted my teeth and, yes, that's right, fell to one knee, and...

I felt a presence behind me, not to either side. I heard Falida move. Ossified rock crept around me and I heard a small hit against it from the outside.

I slowly picked up my sword in my only hand. No force behind it. Luckily the sword was meant to be used one-handed. Agh. I hoped Falida wouldn't retract. I hoped I wouldn't have to use it.

Petra stood. Falida encased us. Another hit. She cracked slightly, but crept under and around us until me, Petra, and the elf were sealed inside.

Chnk.

I stared at the sword in my hand and at the elf, whose leg was bleeding into the wall. She was pale. I didn't know if she would survive or not.

Chnk.

The ninja. Sartaca. And Wienlie, and Varim, and everyone else, they were still out there. Eric and Rudolf.

Chnk. Chnk.

I stared at the sword at my hand. I stared into the colors reflected off the flat of the dull blade. Red, red, red.

Chnk. Chnk. Chnk—

"God," I said. "God."

Chnk chnk chnk chnk—

"Wayfarer," said Petra.

"Petra," I said. My voice broke.

"Are you..."

"I don't want to die," I said. I felt tears in my eyes. *Yes. Yes, just cry already, stupid bitch, moron, just cry in front of her, just cry.* I didn't want to die. I didn't, I didn't!

"You..."

"I don't even care about them," I said, pulled in a gasp, "I just don't want to die. I don't want to be killed like that. I can't even do anything. I," *chnk chnk chnk chnk chnk chnk chnk* still omnipresent even as I talked, "I don't want to die," I said, my face twisting.

"You'll die someday anyway," said Petra, trying to rouse me. She touched me, on the shoulder. I threw her arm off and more tears fell.

"I know! I know I will, I think about it all the time, I hate it! I want to create a world where death doesn't exist, you know, and you can be everything Petra, that's why I was drawn to this, this community of people, they were called rationalists, I'll tell you about them after, I just, not because of any utilitarianism or belief in good or desire to change the world for the better I just don't want to die. I can't die here Petra, Petraahahaa," I scrunched my nose and brow and gripped my sword harder and harder and harder—

"Wayfarer, if Falida is shattered, she will turn entirely into blood," said Petra. "Falida must not shatter. It is her curse. It is her own glorious sacrifice. Falida will have to open up soon or else Grape will destroy her. Look, the crack has already begun, so Wayfarer, listen."

I slowly turned to look at her.

"What do farmers do to get rid of the foliage on their property...?"

"They burn it," I said.

"Right," said Petra. Her eyes sparkled. "And remember? Varim has a trap, complete with incendiary explosives, in the middle of

the camp. We have to burn Grape to *death*."

I stared at her.

"We have to kill her Wayfarer, we have to bring death to her, can you do that with me? You won't die, and if you do it'll be with me, and so it'll be okay. But you won't die, I'll protect you, so put your life in my hands. Put your head in my lap and life in my hands and let's do this together Wayfarer. Let's burn her. Let's show this demon the fires of our world, you can come from hell but you've never felt fire till you've felt fire here, let's do it Wayfarer. Let's do it."

She spread her arms out, smiled. I could see from Falida's thin shield vines had wrapped around us and the strikes of Grape's dirk hitting the compartment were rapidfire miscellaneous now. Despite this she stood proud and smiled hard.

Slowly I nodded, slowly. "Yeah," I said, "Yeah, let's do this, Petra, let's kill her ass. Let's burn this bitch down."

Petra slowly turned. We both faced Grape who blurred and blurred and struck and struck and struck and struck and then Petra snapped. Falida shrank instantly into a long staff, and then the sound of Petra's snap came.

Wait, no...

The sound had come way too late. My eyes widened in slow motion; I heard it:

"I tried. I seriously tried."

"It wasn't me."

"Vow:

"I hate this. I hate, being, God, a stupid autistic freak. It's my fault. It's my fault. I'm going to, going to block you. I'm seriously, sorry, look what I've done, I've made you hate me. I checked. I checked just now and half of our conversations were started by you and, and, now, God, I need to k—"

"Fine? It is your fault? Literally all of it is YOUR FUCKING FAULT and—"

"GNASHING IS DONE IN A PRIVATE SPACE."

015 / orphan chewing

The vow came into effect. Instantly me and Petra stood in the center of a massive red room. White curtains adorned the walls. I looked around frantically.

"It's mouth-themed," I said. That was right. The white curtains, cut in such shapes, they were teeth, and the room's redness, well, that was natural, wasn't it? There was low light, but everything was visible anyway. Everything was visible except for the darker red pool of blood on the floor, that is—that took me a second to notice. It matched the rest of the room.

Its identification was assisted by Sartaca's corpse on the floor. Or was it a corpse? It wasn't, she groaned, clutched at ... the stump of her arm. She was missing an arm. Blood spread.

And there was Tio too. Of course there was Tio, right? She was in fetal position on the floor. Petra stood with Falida in staff formation in her hand. And in the center of the room was the Gnash demon.

Silence set in except for our heavy breathing, and Tio's whimpering.

"HELLO HELLO FRIENDS WHO I WILL KILL MAYBE IF YOU DO NOT LISTEN. HELLO HELLO ARE YOU LISTENING?"

"Wayfarer, what did you say to Wienlie to make him attack the demons," Petra whispered urgently.

"Eric," I said. "I put it together. These guys are farmers and Eric's family live on their farm."

Petra kept her eyes on Gnash. "Umu."

"I had a dream. A white-haired stretched woman told me 'no let nor lien for farmers.'"

"You don't have to explain, I can put it together," said Petra. "Look, Gnash is applying his vow as a domain. So we won't be able to leave unless we kill him so says Falida."

"YOU ARE LISTENING FRIENDS AND TALKING AND YOU CAN HEAR ME BUT YOU ARE NOT RESPONDING TO ME."

"How do we kill something like this? He has no organs or anything," I said.

Petra loosely smiled. "The same way you kill anything, aha~? ... enough raw force should be the play, right? It should be okay, umm, I hope?"

"Is there any way to predict how many vows he has?"

"Not that I or Falida know of..." said Petra.

Gnashing is done in private.

"We're listening," I said, turning my attention to Gnash, who stood solitary.

"GOOD THAT IS GOOD—I MUST SAY SOMETHING FRIENDS YOU MUST LISTEN."

I watched him.

"TRADE OFFER. I DO NOT KILL YOU—IN EXCHANGE—HAND FRENDLIAN 'ERIC EIGHT' TO GRAPE. STATUS?"

Sword shook in hand. I breathed out heavily. "M-make a vow. Give your word."

"YOU WISH ME TO MAKE A GLORIOUS SACRIFICE," said Gnash. "I WILL NOT."

"Fuck you," I said, "If you want to make this work PROMISE IT. Promise that you won't kill us. Actually," I saw Gnash start, "No, promise that you'll stop ANYONE ELSE from killing us too! That's the only way we'll accept that. And, and, you know. If you were totally sure you could kill us without any trickery you'd have done it already. We have a chance, Petra."

Petra nodded.

Sword... shook... in... hand...

"FINE."

Gnash disappeared. A second passed in which I rotated slowly on the ball of my foot. I swung my sword on instinct or impulse to the right and it slammed into the red ground. *Fuck* I thought, pulling at it, I had gotten it wrong, not like before. Gnash appeared at the shoulder of my stump arm but Petra swung Falida (or maybe Falida swung Petra), slamming red polestaff right into his jaw, sucker punch severe power! Gnash flew backwards, tumbled, recovered.

I glanced at Petra as the sword finally unstuck, wobbled.

"That wasn't me," she said, "It was Falida's great strength! We are equal, as long as Falida..."

"As long as Falida can continue to draw blood," I said.

"Yes," said Petra. "I'll use all mine up, whatever it takes, before I dip into Tio's blood, Sartaca's. Yours. I'm sure you'd prefer that..."

"Please don't," I said.

Gnash wobbled on his feet. "STRONG HIT VERY GOOD DELICIOUSLY WE FIGHT. CAN YOU TAKE THE TEETH?"

He rushed at us, coming in from the side in a wild leap. His gnashing jaw unhinged, teeth ready to snap down! Petra swung Falida upwards, bashing Gnash into the air where he flipped and flipped in stellar silhouette pirouette, coming to a stop at the top; flip! He extended his legs powerfully smashing against the red roof of the mouth-room and rocketed down through the air toward us. I turned tail and ran; Petra threw herself to the side and Falida shielding took substantial damage but did not shatter.

"Petra, are you good," I shouted.

She pulled in a breath. "Quicker, Wayfarer!"

We seemed to be matched against Gnash. Falida was fast and strong enough to barely intercept his attacks, block and counter him, but we had no way of moving the stalemate further. And Gnash might have still had unrevealed vows, right?

"Petra!" I shouted. We were on opposite sides of the room. Gnash was between us. "Demons come from an associative plane, right?"

"Right," said Petra. "That's right, Wayfarer...! Very good word for it! Do you..."

"Trying to think of something," I shook my head.

"—c-*lick*—WHY ARE WE TALKING? **Vow: PEOPLE CAN'T TALK WHILE THE MOUTH IS GNASH-GNASH-GNASHING!**"

The room began to shake. The teeth rattled and rattled and rattled and me and Petra were both sent wobbling. On the other hand, Gnash ... it seemed Gnash was rooted to the floor. Sartaca and Tio were rattled. Tio had stopped moving. I tried to shout at Petra, "Stay with me!" but it was no use. We were shut up!

"FRIENDS WE SEEM TO HAVE REACHED A VERY CERTAIN POSITION IN THIS GAME FRIENDS. I SEEM TO HAVE CORNERED YOUR KING BUT HE IS NOT IN CHECK AND I DO NOT HAVE THE PIECES TO PUT HIM IN CHECK. WE ARE IN STALEMATE FRIENDS!!!! WELL WELL WELL THEN! I SHALL—c-*lick*—MAKE A VOW. WATCH THIS FRIENDS THE POWER OF LANGUAGE AND DEMON SELF-BELIEF FRIENDS WATCH THIS WATCH WATCH WATCH WATCH

"Vow [Glorious Sacrifice]: I SHALL REVEAL MY LAST DEMON VOW IN EXCHANGE FOR A SUBSTANTIAL BOOST IN POWER PROPORTIONATE TO THE VALUE OF THE INFORMATION REVEALED.

"Vow: A PROPER GNASHING IS THE STRONGEST ATTACK ANY PERSON IS CAPABLE OF!!!"

A red aura surrounded the Gnash demon. Sparks zapped along the edges of his body, ringing him, illuminating him. He spread his stubby legs apart, slowly rotated around the room... me and Petra were still on opposite sides, but now Petra stood upon a platform of Falida, solid and steady. Falida moved with the floor, equalized. I was the weak link.

Glittering the Gnash demon disappeared.

I looked around, wildly.

"FRIENDS: LOOK UPON IT AND DESPAIR: **THE STRONGEST ATTACK OF SUNNY PRIVATE.**"

Gnash closed his jaw. I saw him dimly, turned. Instantly I felt something was wrong. I felt sick, I felt—intense pain burst from my chest and the world dimmed. Blood exploded out and a massive chunk of flesh and gristle fell to the ground. My eyes defocused. The room instantly stopped jolting—gnashing.

I was between death and life. I was between Gnash and Falida. Petra ran toward me, swung Falida down. She surrounded me, surrounded the side of me that had been broken off. Snap! Falida mitosis. Suddenly there were two, one creeping around my body and one in Petra's hand.

"DID YOU LIKE THAT, FRIENDS?"

"How do we beat him," I said. "There *has* to be—*hcckkkkk*—a way." I coughed blood.

"Wayfarer."

"Petra," I said, watching Gnash slowly turn toward us.

"There is a way," said Petra.

"What is it," I said, eyes flitted to her, traced her outline.

"Falida is a vampire," said Petra. "Someone has to die in exchange for her true powers to be unlocked even for a minute, or just above that."

"'Even for a minute,'" I repeated.

"One minute, six seconds," said Petra. "And six-tenths of a second. Sixty six point six... that's how long Falida will last, powered off of the life of a Person."

"..."

"Choose, Wayfarer."

"THE STRONGEST ATTACK OF WIENLIE OTIO-FUGET."

Gnash's teeth shone brilliantly. Kaleidoscopic he fractured and a billion translucent copies surrounded us. Every jaw dove down toward us. Swift penetration imminent. Our flesh would be obliterated. Falida morphed to protect us—each tooth shining like the moon slammed into her material and a thousand thousand splintering cracks ran across her surface. Petra sucked a deep breath in. Her hands remained splayed outward.

They were pale. Petra was pale, slow. Her right eye twitched as she grimaced at Gnash reforming with his massive jaw clamped around splintered Falida.

The only sound was our breathing.

"Is Falida...?"

Slowly,

Falida...

Slowly crept in on herself. Gnash lowered to the floor. His stout body wobbled. Falida appeared like a gag in his mouth and then —and then—blood sprayed out. It contrasted with the white of the teeth it sprayed on, empty canvases. A long spine stuck from Gnash's back. He had been totally impaled straight through. And slowly Falida drew herself out, connected to Petra via strings. Petra wobbled on her feet.

We stood. Had Gnash been killed? The domain did not dissipate. That was a scare. Falida had nearly completely shattered. If the lattice had worsened even *slightly*...

I coughed blood and fell onto the floor.

"The Falida on your chest has instructions to keep you alive," whispered Petra. "It, it should be enough, umm, Falida herself is —uncooperative right now..."

I grimaced. Slowly silence set in. It seemed that it'd all be

"**THE STRONGEST ATTACK OF THE HOUSEKI FALIDA.**"

From Gnash extended a thousand tiny arms and something blurred in the air in front of me. That was all—and a thousand tiny glimmering lines held in the air between Gnash and Falida. Each line of Gnash met its end tapering into each line of Falida's. Equally matched.

Petra wobbled on her feet.

No. It wasn't like rolling two six sided die and getting a 3 on each roll. It was more like getting a 2 and a 4. While the initial attacks were each the same, their outcomes could be anything but! Anything had the capability to influence any attack. It was foolishness to assume just because Gnash's attack was fundamentally the same as Falida's it'd be *only exactly as powerful*. This is all to say: it was a gamble on Gnash's part.

A gamble that paid off. In six different places on Petra's body a thin strand poked through, and pronouncing prominently was sharp tip that drip-drip-dripped blood from each of these six different places.

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, I thought.

"Falida makes her choice herself," said Petra. Blood leaked from her mouth. She coughed and smiled. "Sorry, Wayfarer...! I know this couldn't have been the way you wanted... wanted it to..."

Tendrils spread throughout the room groping and groping. Falida found Tio's body. Tio whimpered. Falida found Sartaca's body. Sartaca groaned. And Falida skipped over me.

The tendrils wrapped around Tio's neck, Sartaca's neck. The selection was made. Blood fell onto the floor splattering. Every tendril pierced Sartaca's heart. She jolted and died. The blood and life pump-pump-pumped its way to Falida's lattice on Petra, encasing poor pale Petra. She disappeared within its depths.

"OH-OH-OH AS FRIEND GRAPE WOULD SAY. BLOODY-HANDED BENEDICT ARNOLD I SEE."

Falida fully encased Petra and shone perfect blood-red. Her rippling substance defined. A knight, suit of armor in full detail. In one hand was a long broadsword. In the other was a shield.

"WE FIGHT," said Gnash suddenly. Instantly they both moved. **SUNNY PRIVATE. SUNNY PRIVATE. WIENLIE OTIO-FUGET. SUNNY PRIVATE.** They floated and floated and lines of light crossed, Falida skated around the edge of the room and all that happened with those hundred illusory jaws is they crashed into the floor and the wall and blood gouted, gouted out.

I crawled along the floor. Light exploded above me. Gnash teleported and teleported again; with each asymptotic erratic movement a little bit of Falida exploded off of Petra's body, the

skeleton of the beautiful dread knight. I crawled faster. Gnash paid me no heed, or if he did—**SUNNY PRIV—**I heard, before Falida slammed into him, chopped at him with her sword. A piece of enamel flew off and landed in scarlet blood.

All I remember thinking was *I don't want to die.*

It had gone so wrong. Sartaca's corpse slowly shrank into the red lines connected to it still. One minute and six seconds. How long had it been? Ten seconds? It felt like an eternity. I crawled toward the wall. Fresh blood welled. I had realized it. I had realized how to defeat Gnash. It was violence after all. He could handle the piercing of the throat. But could he handle a bloodletting?

Clash. Gnash smashed against Falida's shield and pinned her to the ground and then repeatedly over and over and over CHOMP CHOMP CHOMP savagely it and tore at her shield, her arm, more and more blood flew off, exploded off, Falida self-terminating like a rocketship landing.

I grimaced. My face anguished was stained with blood. I was stained with blood, all over. I felt awful, inside and out. It had gone so wrong.

I took a breath in, coughed more gore from my mouth.

"Falida," I said. "You're a vampire. Please. Take its blood. Suck all the blood of this devil out."

"**THE HOUSEKI FALIDA.**" Lines upon lines burst outward and plates and pieces and greebles and Falida shed and shed and shed. Petra's head lolled, exposed. Only Falida's lower jaw was left! Her head was completely uncovered.

I stared at her. She couldn't die. Her head was uncovered. A lucky blow would kill her instantly. And I almost reached my hand out.

But I turned back to Falida at my chest. "Falida. Please, please I'm begging you. Please."

Nothing happened. The domain was part of Gnash's body, wasn't it? All thoughtstuff. It had to work. If only Falida would vampirize the blood. That was my plan! Since the domain was part of Gnash's body, had to be part of Gnash's body, dealing enough damage to *it* would kill Gnash. It would work. It would work. It was a genius plan. I had put it together, it was perfect, it would work. If only, If only Falida would consume it. If only Falida would listen to me.

"Please," I said again. Another tendril smashed through blind-knight-Falida's armor. Benedict Arnold stumbled, and again! Again! Blood painted every surface and person red.

"PLEASE," I said, and my voice broke. "PLEASE SAVE HER. PLEASE," I said. "*PLEEEAAAAASE,*" I screamed, until I faltered, and my head fell down. "*Please,*" I said.

Please.

A tendril rushed toward Falida. This would be the killing blow. No, she knocked it away with the flat of her sword. And same with the next. I couldn't stop watching it. Parry after parry, her life was on the line, finally Falida found her flow. Falida, win for me. Falida, don't let Petra die. She wouldn't obey me. She wouldn't win this fight. So she had to not let Petra die at any cost. Please, Falida. Please. Parry, block, riposte, Falida gained ground, an attack rushed toward her, perfect timing, she would instantly parry and penetrate the enemy's defen—

66.6 SECONDS. Falida exploded into blood and all that was left of her was two cancerous and skeletal ugly crow's or hag's wings on Petra's back. Petra's eyes were wide. Her body was entirely pale. The tendril penetrated through her gut.

She made a sound.

"Please," I said, my voice tiny.

My one arm was all that held me up on my knees like this. Around it ripples spread out in the pool of blood that coated the room's floor. Slaughterhouse floor. Sartaca was dead.

And Petra...

I broke. A low sound escaped my mouth. No, a high sound. I slowly crumpled, forehead and hair falling onto the floor. Stained red like the rest of me. My shoulders shook. I cried.

The tendril retracted from Petra's gut. She fell lifelessly.

Gnash slowly plodded up to me. I took in a shuddering breath and broke into more sobs.

"**Adore my regal foot**," said a voice toneless.

Gnash turned around. Not struggling he walked to the single foot of the elf, so stained with blood. She lay limply. I slowly raised my head and watched in horror.

"**Caress my regal foot**," said Tio.

I swallowed. Gnash's stubby hands reached out and stroked her foot. Blood met blood and resulted in red.

"**Kiss my regal foot**," said Tio.

Gnash lowered his head to her foot. And he strained against the ability. He strained so hard. I could see him trying to move his head to chomp her foot off. But Gnash wasn't very clever, not like Grape. He didn't know how to do anything besides use the cards he had set up beforehand! And finally his bony lip came to rest on her big toe. He kissed her. His brimstone activated immediately after the kiss, and Tio's power was torn apart inside from the sheer fury of it all. In fact, with all the pain and trauma of that ability, with everything tearing up... Tio...!!! Her ability effect had already gone into play. Initiative order!

Tio exhaled.

Gnash turned into paste.

016 / love [to] fell

Tio, Petra, and I suddenly were on the dark forest floor. Falida on Petra's back pulsed. She was totally colorless. "Falida," I said, clawing at the ground with my one arm, I had toppled over, my side had crashed into the dirt and I couldn't pick myself up. Soil in my mouth. "F-Falida," I said, voice breaking.

The moon shone down, and also from the forest. I didn't care. I grabbed at Petra's body, shook her. Blood stained my hand again. More blood. Everything was blood and we were all covered in it.

Tio stared upward into the sky on her back. And there was a silhouette still standing. Varim trembled. The fight had moved entirely past him.

Where was the wound. Her gut, right? Petra's gut. The Falida on Petra's back was, yes, again colorless. No blood. So no motion, no ability to heal. The aspect of blood that allowed her to save us all was gone. But there was still hope. There had to still be hope. (A crash came from the forest.)

"Falida," I said. "Falida... Falida, make a contract with me, like you did with Petra. You can do that, can't you? Make a contract with me. Please. P-please," I said, my voice broke.

There was silence, except for glimmering Falida on my chest.

My face twisted as I began to cry again. Just work. Why don't you work? Why isn't this world right?

"It's not right," I said. "HEAL HER, FALIDA, PLEASE," I said.

And finally, achingly finally Falida crept from my chest. I vomited blood. Coming along my chest, shoulder, arm, she settled there and at the stump formed into a long limb; and attached to that was a long hand with too many joints that slowly, insurmountably processed downward into Petra's chest and belly. The hand pooled. I clutched at it, taken residence on my stump, with my own arm, but was it any use?

Petra's body twitched. She was alive. She had to be alive. It wasn't just muscles firing connected to nerves and neurons, it wasn't a fluke, she was alive. But I couldn't see anything through my tears, so I didn't know for sure. I didn't know the truth of the world for sure. (If I had sought Truth...?)

Falida and Petra connected. Falida and I connected. Petra and I reconnected. It was hard. Falida slowly grew on her, came around back, recolored the broken wings coming from Petra's shoulder blades. Slowly, Falida was reactivating...

Petra sucked in a breath, suddenly. Her eyes opened. Blood came from her mouth in a trickle. Falidas disconnected; the one on my arm split off from Petra's. Mitosis. I stared at it.

I couldn't control it at all. My arm, no, the Falida on my stump, this false crystal arm, was totally, completely out of my control. It gleamed, iridescent, now light pink, now turning orange ... lanterns and small fires on the floor provided light juxtaposed against the white moonlight from above and flashing around.

"Petra," I said.

Her eyes flitted to me staccato saccadic. She let out a trembling breath and her eyelids fluttered and she couldn't hold that gaze.

"I'll do it," I said, "I'll do it I'll do it I'll do it. I'll get us out of this. I won't let more people die. I'm so, I'm so sick, I hate this so much." I hated the feeling of watching them all die around me. I couldn't save Sartaca. We couldn't save the ninja. We couldn't really save Tio. Had I even saved Eric? Haha... that had brought devastation to us all anyway.

But I was rooted in place. Tio stared up into the sky and Petra barely breathed. I couldn't leave her. I couldn't at all. White flashed from the forest; Wienlie rocketed out, greatsword fluttering around him. Inside its chambers milled dizzy-dizzying dancing suns that burned and burned and burned away with the power of moonfire. He gestured with his hand and the greatsword sliced upward.

I closed my eyes over Petra. I needed to get up. I needed to have the strength to fight without others, no, not even that—to join the fight with Wienlie. To let Petra go, even if it hurt me. With an anguished exhalation I slowly grabbed my bloody sword from the ground, and found the strength to slowly rise...

"I'll do it," I repeated to myself. I was so weak. I am so weak. But I somehow found it within myself to stand up.

I turned to see Wienlie. I stood in between him... (and I turned) and Grape. I slowly exhaled.

Wienlie snarled. Holy air burst around him and the battlefield shone with silver or white light. He dashed in, shoved me to the side, I was launched and fell on my butt. Immediately several spectral silhouettes appeared in the air around him, vaulted and dashed and jumped and slid in, and elegantly they all attacked at once or one after the other, and sparks flew, sparks flew as Grape nimbly danced between every silhouette, left a daring

destructive dramatical dirk-gash with her blade with each divine smite mighteous. White light poured out of the silhouettes' wounds. But the light of the moon wouldn't be extinguished just like that! Again and again more Wienlies came from the air, sprouting up out of nowhere, will-o-the-wisps given shape and form. And again and again Grape slashed through each.

Grape looked frantically around. They seemed to be matched. So—

Vow: GRAPES ARE PURPLE OR GREEN.

She looked around, looked around, looked around, found it. She ran. Away from Wienlie! Towards one of the lanterns on the ground she ran, picked it up. It glowed yellow. She had lost her own lantern when she moved bodies, so of course she had to get a new one. What was she doing?

A thick vine grew across the lantern. Wienlie made a sound, leapt at her, but she swiped her hand up; a wall of thorns grew from a nearby vine, barricaded, didn't matter, Wienlie slashed through that with a clawing gesture; the zweihander slashed it, singed it.

The vine exploded. Plant gore flew everywhere. Only the skin was left which with a simple manipulation telekinetic bent over the lantern. Thorns silenced every other light at once.

White and green battled. Grape stepped forward, a manic smile on her face. "Ohoho! A battle of color! My green versus your white! My truth versus yours! The truth of perception, coloration!"

Wienlie snarled again. White mist glowing streamed from his eyes. He launched off but the closer he went the greener his

light became.

"That's right! Ohohoho! That's right, Wienlie! Are you scaaaaared? You know that your little white light can only flash-flash flicker like a glowbug or firefly! My mundane *lantern* beats your very ability! Ohohohahahahah!!!"

I looked around. Was there anyone who could help? It was me and Wienlie. But this presented a challenge. Something about Grape's light threatened him. He didn't...

He didn't want to become *green*. If the green light touched him and made him appear green something bad would happen. Perhaps he would be manipulated like a grape? Twisted and twisted and twisted until his head popped off.

The green light mingled around regardless. I tried to stay behind Wienlie, in the white, pure light. The true light...

Yes, anyway. I looked around. Tio and Petra were at my feet. Petra squirmed, sweating. Tio had stopped moving completely, and stared blankly upward. I felt something within me edge closer to perdition.

"... Ah," I said.

I lifted my eyes. Wienlie and Grape were so bright I couldn't see anywhere else in the darkness. It was just them. Something rustled in the bushes; probably the murmurings of a Wienlie clone imminent.

Wienlie panted. His shoulders rose and fell. At his side the smoking zweihander spun lazily. White motes of light glimmered around us. I stared at Grape's green lantern. I remembered, I had seen a similar lantern at Tio's side, with the

spinning stone. The stone needed to stop spinning. That, or we needed to break it.

"The lantern," I said. Wienlie made a noise. He started forward, or his clones did, one after the other they pursued Grape. But she was fast, so fast, and more than anything else she was on guard. Clone after clone after—his zweihander came down, unexpected, surprise! Grape evaded, it skimmed the vines on her skin, and the green light shone on it—

Nothing happened. Grape saw it was the zweihander. She grinned.

"You want me to reveal my hand, huh?"

I looked at Wienlie. The zweihander slowly returned to him. And Grape slowly returned to a settled position. We were in neutral.

Then I turned tail. "Wienlie, follow!" I shouted, running toward the center of camp. Grape pursued us, not with vines but with her physical body. She had the lantern, after all!

She caught up with ease. We stood underneath the massive rock roof of it all. Rudolf and Eric stepped from the forest. Both held guns. We had guns in the first place? I felt a lurch.

Our positioning was like so. Me and Wienlie stood closest to the wall with explosives on it. Grape had cornered us, then, between a rock—literally—and a hard place. Eric and Rudolf themselves cornered Grape, training guns on her. Eric and Rudolf weren't under the rock ceiling, but we three were.

Everything came to a stop. Grape fixated on the explosives on the wall behind us. She nodded.

"Oho! You want to catch me aflame, hum? Or bring down rocks on my head and kill me?"

Slowly vines crept up around her, reinforcing each other, two massive leafy hands creeping up from the ground, wait, no, bodies and heads and limbs and arms grew on these hands, supportive, a chalice, a roof... Grape was creating a cushioned roof, to catch any rock as it fell.

"That's not a valid move that leads to your victory," she observed. "It's not chess! It's real life! This is a fight, where if you sacrifice a piece, that piece dies! It's not just faaake~!"

I slowly turned to Wienlie.

"If you trigger those explosives, you diiiieee! Game OOOOVERRRR! After aaall, you aren't as tough as me, oho! And even then... I have another vow. Want me to reveal it now? Oooookayyy, then I will! My other vow is that *vines can regrow from any damage*. That's right! I'm immortal. You can't kill me at all! Ohahhahahahahohohohohohohahhahahaahahah!"

I slowly leaned in to Wienlie's ear. And I whispered to him the second secret, much as I had done before.

Wienlie's eyes, still glowing, were slowly fading. He was reaching the end of his connection with the moon. I could tell! Abilities like this never ever could last an entire fight. He had synchronized, and now he'd go back to normal. Already his array of clones had been wavering.

Grape turned to idly view the two with firearms. "Eeeeeric! It's good to see you. It's time to come home. Come on, Eric, exit this stalemate. Bend down like a dog and pledge yourself to me and

maybe I'll kill your friends quickly...? Ohohoho! Put down that gun..."

I couldn't see Eric's face from this far away, but I know he said something. His body trembled, and I could see that.

"It won't do anything at all. Bullets are just too slow! So put it down...!"

I felt like I heard what he said next, though I'll never be able to confirm it, never *ever*. "You wouldn't understand my world..."

Eric, hero? Eric, lion...

I thought about Tio. She hadn't been nice to me. But Grape had killed her or caused her to die, just like that. She had just been slaughtered. I saw her corpse on the ground still in visible range. Would she ever move again, or was that it? Was that all her life would be? Would we just leave her on the floor in this forest, in a puddle of her own blood and tears, and...?

I thought about Sartaca. I hadn't known Sartaca at all, but she had a cool accent, and she seemed worthy, and Gnash had just killed her remorselessly. At the beginning of the battle. No, that's not right. Falida had done it, but Falida... Falida had to, otherwise all of us would've died. It was still Gnash's fault.

I thought about Eric. I thought about how I had saved him. He hated me. I had only made it worse. I had brought this devastation on everyone.

I thought about Petra. I thought about her face in the tent. I thought about when I had met her, how I felt like she understood me. How I liked her so much more than Rudolf immediately. I thought about how she looked looking up at me and telling me she wouldn't, wouldn't mind if—"Agh," I said,

winced... I thought about Petra on her back like that. Dying. I thought about how maybe she wouldn't survive this.

'I didn't want to be that kind of person.' That had been what I had said every time I had to save someone before. That was my reasoning. I tried so hard to be good. But you know as well as I know that I'm scum by now, right? You understand what type of person I am. I'm shiftless. 'I didn't want to be that kind of person.'

That, that wasn't my reasoning here. Not anymore. Tears clouded my vision as I ran through it again in my mind. I didn't just want to be a good person.

Really, really, I wanted to save Petra. It didn't matter what other lies I was telling myself right now. Lies and truth both built up to the same conclusion. In every single world I reached the same conclusion.

'Ummm, Wayfarer, you're so silly! Next time you want to make a confession, you know you don't have to do all this to prove it...?'

Because I loved her, somehow, even if I was scum. I was *capable* of love, even though I was scum. I had to be. I had to be capable of love, even if it was malformed and ill. I had to make something. I had to lean on Petra and say that I loved her. Even if I wasn't sure.

It didn't matter how hard it was. It didn't matter who I had to kill to get there. It didn't matter who on my side died. Sacrifice all for the soul of one. Just like Petra said. Just cling to Petra and don't let her go. None of it mattered.

If I had to kill a million billion trillion demons for the rest of infinity, in this moment I would. For Petra.

"Falida, Petra told you to keep me alive, right…?"

I looked down at my crystal arm. I smiled desperately at my reflection.

"Then you know what to do," I said.

With my other arm I tossed my sword onto the ground. Blood exploded from the crystal arm; I raised it into the air, fist curled, and the blood covered my entire body once more.

"Eric, Rudolf!"

With my human arm I pointed at Grape:

"BLOW HER BACK TO HELL!"

017 / no let nor lien for farmers

Rudolf had never been a good man.

It's not too early or unprompted to tell you that, is it? He hadn't ever been. It was obvious he was compensating for *something,* ha! Ha! He hadn't ever had a spine or principles. It pissed him off—that's right, people without spines or principles pissed him off; he had such little spine *or* principles that the person Rudolf was pissed off at most in the whole entire world was Rudolf, he himself.

Go deeper. The butterfly retreats into its chrysalis. His family left him for a fault of his own. Did you predict it? His looseness and laxness and moral fault led him to infidelity. He was young and charismatic unlike his wife who had degenerated into a mutant hag. Led him into a back alley and etc. etc. Yes, Rudolf was a secret homosexual! Isn't that so surprising? That's what he had done… to break the norm. Pursuit of the true self. This isn't a confessional, father, so spare him the pain of elaboration. He told his wife itself. He wanted to be castigated. But he didn't want to lose his connection to his family entirely, so entirely.

Rudolf had never been a good man.

That principle? No man left behind? There was this man, his name was Jersey, or that's what everyone called him. He wore a leather jersey. No man left behind. That was Jersey's purpose. Taught Rudolf everything about it. Taught Rudolf what a real good man looked like. They were hunkered in the pits one night and they had been cut off and one of their men broke his leg and

you know what Jersey did? Picked the wounded man up on his back and carried him all the way back. That's what.

Jersey was a good man. Rudolf had never been that way.

What guides you, Rudolf?

"All, all I did was inherit *Jersey's* cause," he confessed. Black void surrounded him. There was no one besides him. "'T's all. I..."

Did you know it was bullshit?

"Yeah, yeah, I did," he confessed. "I just needed something. I needed to be someone besides me."

You put on a mask that wasn't you.

"That's—that's right," said Rudolf. He exhaled bitterly, looked down to the right.

Where does the mask end and Rudolf begin?

"I don't know," said Rudolf. "Did I change? I told that boy, told Wayfarer you'll never feel like you changed. I don't feel like I've..."

What defines who you are?

Rudolf had never been a good man. He had inherited Jersey's purpose. Inherited Jersey's words. "Never leave a man behind." But that was all.

Reality appeared around Rudolf. He held the revolver in his hand, long barrel gleaming in the mixed, melding green and white lights. And on the other side of the battlefield Wayfarer smiled, anguished and desperate. *That boy* had presence

around him. The same presence Jersey did. Maybe inside of Wayfarer, there was no rot. Not like Rudolf. And Rudolf had really presumed...

Wayfarer raised his crimson arm into the air and it drained and drained. Blood washed down his shoulder and below his clothes on his body. Wayfarer was totally soaked with it. Falida on his arm cycled through orange, blue, pink, so many different colors, slowly, slowly becoming crystal clear.

Wayfarer closed his eyes. Was there grief on his face? Nothing was clear at all.

He pointed.

"BLOW HER BACK TO THE HELL SHE CAME FROM!"

It didn't matter whether or not Grape could dodge. Rudolf was a soldier. He had been waiting for that command his whole life. In this moment he was sure it'd all be okay as long as he followed that order. He pulled the trigger six times:

Many things happened at once. Rudolf fired those six shots at Grape. She evaded easily, as Rudolf had predicted; a vine whipped out, wrapped around Eric, and yanked him toward her. The rounds hit the rock structure.

A chunk fell onto the floor. Nearly-clear Falida exploded into a barrier and Wayfarer hunkered down. Wienlie unshielded by all except the light of the moon dashed forward and gripped the zweihander in his hand, and—

Grape who was turned toward Eric didn't see till she finally did —

The trap exploded. It had been damaged, hadn't it? The damage had triggered the trap. White light and rushing flame bent towards them and rocks fell. White light so overwhelming it completely drowned out Grape's green lantern! Which meant nothing could be turned green. Surprise attack! She screeched on the defensive, sent a blast of hellfire at Wienlie, last minute. Wayfarer was swallowed by the light and the flame.

That's why Wienlie had the zweihander in his hand. The hellfire burned all moonlight away, the zweihander lost its magic aura, and still—the massive blade came downward, executioner, and dug into her shoulder and collarbone and ribcage and through the organs and straight down came straight down through feathery light tissue-paper skin and Grape was halved.

They both tumbled back out of the range of the rocks.

Eric and Rudolf didn't. No, that's not right. Rudolf could've.

But Eric had fallen onto the floor. Because of Grape.

Go deeper. The chrysalis becomes a caterpillar splayed out on the wall.

Rudolf sat in a liminal room. A white-haired woman with a stretched face sat in the tree above. Do you feel it resonating yet? Do you feel reality's sine wave yet? Sine, cosine, tangent, cosecant, secant, and cotangent. Reality is a triangle.

Cosecant, sine's reciprocal. In the same way is 'that' different from summoning a Geist... you don't want 'that.' It just *happens*. Usually, you want to just kill yourself, instead...

Rudolf, what do you believe? Look forward into the future. You've gotten half the truth of yourself down, haven't you? You understand your fault, or you think you do. So what does that

mean? What will you do about it, Rudolf? Something isn't true until it affects your identity, you know! Nothing and everything are inseparable.

Jersey's corpse. He had been disemboweled by a sincewraith or enemy soldier. Rudolf dimly remembered it as the last time he cried. Jersey had died. Their crew needed someone to lead them and so Rudolf temporarily assumed that persona of Jersey. And he had never ever taken it off.

Show your true colors or make Jersey's your own. You have to take off the mask to actualize yourself, Rudolf.

"But I can't make Jersey's my own. It's not real. My identity would be totally forged..."

Rudolf saw Eric fall on the floor. The explosion rushed toward the two of them. He had a choice.

Why can't you change who you are?

Why do you have to be defined in this moment by your past?

Why can't you turn into that person you wish you were, Rudolf?

Without understanding why Rudolf dove for Eric, falling on top of him. The two stared at each other from the ground. Rudolf, larger, brutish, embraced him, hugged him, no. No, sheltered him—

Burning chains surrounded Rudolf's skull and penetrated all the way in. Spectral gore explosion!

He saw the woman with the white hair once more. Her long stretched eyes fixated on him.

"Is this you?" she said.

"I..."

"Is this the man you wish to actualize into?"

Rudolf looked up at her.

"Yes," he said.

He felt something settle in his soul. A second spirit inside him woke up. An armored knight stood beside him. The knight's eyes bored into the back of his skull. They bored so deep they reached his brain, and his true self.

Do you see me? Thought Rudolf. Do you really want this, even if you understand who I really am?

Yes, said the Geist.

They synchronized. The burning chains snapped into place. Rudolf grit his teeth and hunkered down over Eric—they were swallowed by the explosion—

LEAVE NO MAN BEHIND

Rudolf's ability activated for the first time. His skin and clothes grew like iron, rippling, completely deflecting the rocks and the shockwave and the flame, and Eric underneath struggled but because Rudolf was hunkered down over him, because Rudolf was putting this effort in to *save him*—he survived. He survived!

The explosion roared and roared and roared and then finally under rock upon rock

—silence.

Growing from my arm was a crystal shell. It was totally clear, and pyramidal. The rocks fell over its slope.

"Falida, accept my blood," I said.

Red began to spread into the crystal arm. I exhaled. I felt awful, inside and out, maybe because of the blood loss. THe amount of blood Falida took from me—which I hoped wasn't a lot—was enough to color her slightly pink. Sluggishly, she moved; the pyramid disappeared, the blood concentrated until she was more mildly reddish. I stood in a cleared circle. There was no rubble. It had all disappeared in the time between then and the dust clearing...

Rudolf laid on top of Eric. Miraculously unharmed. How had he survived?

Wienlie was on all fours on the ground, exhausted. Grape's corpse was burned and halved. Slowly she was turning into little motes of light.

Petra was further in the forest. I needed to see if she was okay.

Tio was dead.

Sartaca was dead.

The ninja was dead.

Slowly the rest of Wienlie's group filtered from one of the passages in the ruins. They were all bloodied and battered as well. The gray man, the healer, the barrel-shaped man.

"Linie," said Wienlie. He slowly stood. His legs were wobbling.

Inanimate I slowly walked, like I was floating, toward the group, in the center of the clearing.

The healer stepped forward. "Wienlie, where is Varim?"

"Varim...?" I said. "I saw him... watching us fight. But..."

I looked toward where I had seen his silhouette before.

We found his corpse in the forest. His neck was broken and he had not been dead long. He had tried to run from the fight, and tripped on a root, which his foot was still caught in, and he broke his neck and died.

Four or maybe five of us were dead. Wienlie, Rudolf, Eric, the gray man, the healer girl, the barrel man, and I, and maybe Petra, were all that remained.

Wienlie had returned to that smile. He had no more anguish on his face.

"Resurrection is limited," he said. "Humanity only has twenty thousand more slots in the Gerot Machine for that. We'll bury them. This is close enough to the outpost if we get approval for a resurrection we'll be able to exhume them. And if not ..."

It was better to bury them than leave them to rot. We all agreed on that.

It turned out Wienlie's group had gotten into their own confrontation in the forest, a wave of Sunder trying to capitalize on our fight with the demons. The traps had suddenly all disappeared—because Varim had died. So they were beaten and battered, but none of them were dead. Not like Tio or Sartaca or all the others.

We were all silent.

I went for Petra. I crouched down over her body and placed my hand on her chest. Her eyes opened slightly. She smiled.

"We won?" she said softly.

"We did," I said, voice breaking. "Against demons, we won. So many people died," I paused, collected myself, "four of us thirteen."

Her eyes flitted down to my arm. "I see Falida's still..."

"Following the orders you gave," I said.

"That Falida doesn't know anything else," said Petra. "Just you."

I tilted my head.

"What happens next...?" said Petra.

"I don't know," I replied. I looked back at the group. If Wienlie's group had been attacked by Sunder... that didn't bode well for anything. Anything at all. I didn't want to get right back into combat. Even with Falida. Even...

I looked back at Petra. She stared right into my eyes and saw my soul. She saw right inside me, because that's the type of person she was. So she understood me.

"Can you move?" I said.

She closed her eyes and took a breath. She tried to move up off the ground, but couldn't. I extended my human arm. She took it, and with effort on both of our parts—we both ached and hurt badly—she was able to stand.

"I'll heal quick," she said. "Falida can support me..."

And limping she followed me to Wienlie and the rest of the group.

Wienlie looked solemnly at all of us.

"We cannot wait the time for reinforcements to arrive, even if it's measured in days, not weeks."

"That doesn't mean..." Linie stepped forward.

"We penetrate the final stretch in two hours," said Wienlie. "Group one will go forward led by me. Group two led by Rudolf will stay behind with the magic plug."

Wienlie gestured to the cannon implement. We each nodded in turn. Everyone was visibly exhausted. But we nodded anyway.

What must be done must be done. The only thing to do is to do it. That's what Rudolf said, right? Sunder would send waves upon waves. We had a choice ahead of us, to die trying or just to die. It was no wonder!

It was unbeatable odds. Wienlie definitely didn't believe we had a chance at clearing through all those monsters. But I...

Petra, Rudolf, and I, we had triumphed over impossible adversity twice now. A third time... it was within our grasp. We had to keep gambling. We had to keep rolling the dice and collecting over and over again. Someday we'd go into debt! Someday we'd lose the game. Someday all of us would die. Someday our connections would disappear. But that day couldn't be today. I was certain. I desperately needed it to not be this day! Someday we'd lose, but it couldn't be now.

That was what I told myself.

Wienlie laid out the groups. Group one was everyone but me, Rudolf, and Eric. We'd stay behind as the minimal guard for the magic plug, which we'd process through fields of corpses into the outpost. Then everything would be connected.

Love lost would be restored. We'd be able to go to the city together. Me and Petra would read those books together.

I made this promise to myself:

I'd beat these unbeatable odds. Whatever the cost, I'd make sure that outpost got reconnected. These would be my million billion trillion demons. I'd surpass Hell and climb to paradise.

There's nothing else to do in a fantasy world but try your hardest and win.

018 / unchange and stay the same

"Haha, fine, uh, I'll give you that, I'm either flat or male, in real life."

"Well that necessitates you being flat either way (that's not a negative, mind)."

Would you believe me if I said I had no intention of dating her?

The last time I told you about Cera I hadn't really gone into detail. Let's fix that. Before the curtains draw... let's talk one last time about Wayfarer.

No. No, that's not really quite right. Eventually at some point she revealed what I had always known but what I was holding out hope for—that she was male in real life. Or that she was assigned male at birth. Cera was transgender, I think, but she... well. She lived in Venezuela. She didn't really have the resources or capability to transition. I didn't know what that looked like either. Did I love Cera?

She was really, really hurt. I remember wanting her to get better so bad. It wasn't like I didn't want to date her flat-out. Really, I was waiting.

"Would you feel differently about me if I was actually a woman?"

I lied and said I wouldn't. That's right; the reason I was putting it all off was, was, well, I wanted to be in a relationship with her if and only if she was cisgender. Would that change now? Would

it? I think it would with someone I cared for that much and was so open with but—I don't know.

I guess you could say all of this is defensible? Could you?

"I'm going, I'm going to block you, I'm clearly unhealthy for you."

I don't remember the context it's like a white void scribbled out or erased backspace control-delete to remove the full word down to the sentence-opening "the."

Sooo ...

I went to Google.com, typed in the phrase "pictures of gun on nightstand," found one that looked appropriately grainy and real, copied it, and pasted it into chat.

"I'll do it."

"Don't. Don't. I hate you. I"

Cera believed me! She started to negotiate, and you know what, I had no intention at all of actually doing it. I never in my life planned to dangle from a noose like that. It's like what I said to Petra. I had no intention of ever killing myself, but I faked my own depression and used it to control others.

I didn't want Cera to leave me.

I kept talking to her the same way as before because I wanted her to keep on loving me, I wanted that security, I wanted her to hang on me even though it'd never be real. I wanted the power of a relationship without the investment of one. I kept making jokes about dating her and everything. I did it so much I made myself sick and you know what one day we had another of those

fights where she was melting down and she blocked me, for two weeks!

She pulled the lancing white sword from its black sheath and severed the red thread. All of them fell at once. Sine waves flattening down to the graph y=0. Our connection was destroyed. Two weeks was all it took to bottom it out.

We talked so many times about trying to go back to the way they were and we never, ever managed to do that. It hurt both of us so so bad because neither of us put in the effort to do that. Did I ever ever ever love Cera? Did I ever feel anything at all for her besides, besides

Obsession, or maybe limerence? I used her to get my own ego off! And then I threw her away like a toy. If I really loved her like I said I did as much as I said I did I'd have been sure, I'd have been sure if I wanted to be with her, and... and...

"Someday we'll meet up, as friends, and go to the sea and see the sunset together."

"You promise? You really promise?"

I promised. I wanted to follow through. I seriously did.

I wanted her to grab my hand. I wanted to extend my hand and be met with connection. But every single time I tried it never ever worked. I remember how happy she was and how she just wanted to be with me and how she was kind to me and tried to do stuff with me. And I wanted her to have only me. I was the type of person to drag her down when she needed to soar. Don't worry, I know how to deal with vulnerable people! Disparage what they do and who they are and all their attempts to get

better so that they stay hooked on you. Don't let them grow because otherwise they'll realize you're just a TOTAL lo~ser~

I wanted to have a monopoly on Cera's identity. That was it. I wanted to decide who she was and own her completely. The identity that she projected to the outside world that comprised "her"—I wanted control of it. And she would give me that control and it was addictive. I wanted to be something, rather than nothing. I wanted someone to love me unconditionally. And the suggestion she'd become anything that wasn't in my shadow was offensive to me.

I'm the type of person to totally drag others down, and hurt them until they can only be with me. If you break their legs and cut off their fingers they have no way to leave your attic, wheelchairs are a totally stupid and inefficient tool of transportation, right?

What about Petra? Did I actually love her? Did I want to be with her, could I picture that? With Petra...

The decision didn't need to be made. I didn't need to go back on anything. I really, really just needed to look at what was immediately ahead of me, and get through that. That way, everything would be alright.

It was an hour till group one was to leave. It didn't really make sense to say Wienlie's group anymore, did it? Group one and group two were our new divisions. Somehow I found myself in close proximity of the gray man.

He wore a pinstriped shirt and was totally monochrome, except for all the red blood that stained him. He had a relaxed face with

a slight smile. But he was totally monochrome. I couldn't stop myself from staring.

He noticed me. "Like it? It's my ability."

"Yeah," I said. "Well. What does it do, besides turn you gray?"

"It makes me see the world better of course," he said. He spoke super rapidly, bobbing his head up and down with each word. His voice fried at the back of his throat, where it came from, instead of his chest, leading it to sound slightly warped. Like an announcer!

"How so," I said.

"Hmmmm you're right better is the wrong word it's more like—vividly," he paused again. "Look at my colors. None right so there's contrast. Contrast against the world in full color and me. Black and white like the telly."

"Yeah," I said.

"I might look super gray but unlike any of you I'll never be gray on the inside! My power helps me to see the natural beauty of the world after all ahahahahaha and the strongest superpower is to never feel depressed!"

"Well I don't think *that's* true," I said. "The strongest superpower is probably, if I was being pedantic, something like, I don't know, omnipotence."

"Don't you think you have so much more ability than what you express on the regular? If only you had the power to make yourself unlock it somehow? Pocket omnipotence my man! Pocket omnipotence ..."

"I do feel like that, a lot," I said. "Wait. Can you slow down your speech slightly? It's kind of hard to comprehend when you say everything like it's all one breath… but, anyway, I think that the limit of what I'm able to do is close to what I'm able to express, I guess. I don't think my own mental health matters that much."

"Well I—" he stopped. "… Well. I disagree, you see… better?" (I nodded.) "Very good very good don't you think—Don't you think you'd be friends with a billionaire if you could be?"

He laughed from the belly, which he also rubbed. Was he performing? "Well I AM because I'm not scared of socializing! I have infinite energy! I am friends with many billionaires."

I looked away, really defensively. "W-well, do you think you're truly getting the whole of the human experience like that…" Really I quite wished I could have that ability. I was constantly stressed…

"Does it matter really?" He chuckled. "Well kid I gotta go prepare now. Edwardius Regius II at your service. Call me if you need anything," he grinned, saluted sloppily, *exeunt*.

Who? *Who!* The owls made their noises from above and watched. Wienlie stared up at them. The moon shone down, down… it was so dark. We had more than enough lanterns to outfit everyone, four of us having …

As a group we traveled together out of the sanctified solace of our camp in the ruins. Several minutes passed. We weren't assailed by anything. The paths inside the trees seemed to lengthen out, curves flattening, stretched longer and longer and longer until it seemed there was no curve to this space, no curve

in any topography, no curve never ever. All of reality was straight lines and tangents. Well, though! If it really was that way then we could just fall through life. There wouldn't be any challenge at all. Then even now I'm still a little bit glad that there are curves.

We moved forward. In the dense and the dark there was suddenly something that blocked the moon and all like. Its silhouette was visible in the night sky so black. It was blacker than black, an ultravoid. Imposing fortress silhouette.

"Is that the outpost...?" I whispered. It was taller than I had thought—really just a long, long keep, stretching up, a half-skyscraper.

Wienlie nodded. He beckoned to group two. We came. He said in a low tone: "Take the magic plug and hide. There's a cave near here as yet unknown to Sunder. It lies to our left through thick branches and vines. Pass under them and continue onward."

How did he know that? Maybe before the outpost went down it had mapped out the world around it. And Sunder could only see through the eyes of his beasts. But...

"How does Sunder not know about it? Couldn't he see through the eyes of insects, too...?"

"Too small," said Wienlie. "Don't connect to information magic that well. Sunder doesn't waste his mana on reigning over bugs like that. Birds are much more useful."

"I see," I said. It made sense, I guess. There's a lot of insects, and if you can't really get anything from them, then what's the point? It's a lot better to just use small animals instead.

"Well," said Wienlie. The darkness encroached. Yes, like he had said before, we were in the heart of darkness, weren't we? Maybe one of Sunder's snakes would jump out of us, and bite us, and kill us dead with burning venom. Us nine stood as one group.

"Let's go," said Wienlie, finally. Rudolf and Eric immediately began moving leftward. Strapped to Rudolf's back was the magic plug. Eric didn't have the strength to anything so I took the wheels, strapped them to my own back with a long and thick rope. We didn't want to leave tracks or be slow so we had to carry its parts individually. We journeyed.

I slowly shifted through thorns behind Rudolf who trudged through before me. They caught on my clothing and tore tiny holes. Eric channeled behind me. Vines passed pareidolic. Wienlie and his group disappeared into nothing, becoming smaller and darker and smaller and darker until either the smallness or the darkness won out—they were gone.

We crawled and crawled. I tripped on a vine, yanked at my foot. It drew slight blood with its long thorns penetrating through my socks. I pulled it out; my foot itched but wasn't maimed or anything!

We found the cave. Little light was let in so we turned on the spinning stones of our lanterns. They whirred! There was the sound of water drip-drip-dripping and nothing else besides our heavy breathing all three of us.

Rudolf bent down. We mounted the wheels on the mana plug so it stood by itself. Eric moved to the entrance.

Rudolf took his box. It was the first time I had clearly seen it being used. Except ... he was staring at an inset red gem, maybe

a ruby, in an outline of silver, at the bottom. He sat. Then he caught me staring.

"It's the connection to Wienlie," he explained. "Or Wienlie's box, rather. If it's cut off from his mana source, then, uh... Pretty good indication he's dead. That or out of range."

I nodded. "So you're watching to see if the incursion goes alright, then."

He nodded slightly, closed his eyes. "All's left to do is the waiting."

So we did. At least for a few minutes, or maybe a minute, or maybe less than that, maybe for like thirty seconds we waited, or I waited, until I opened my eyes again. I still felt anxious over something we had to do, and waiting sequestered away like this was ... well, it didn't make me feel *good!* Eric leaned with his arms crossed against the wall. (White light flashed visible outside even from the cave.) I closed my eyes again. Time passed. Finally, after minutes, minutes of hearing the shelling and the skeeting I opened my eyes again.

I slowly made my way around the cannon-shaped magic plug—it *was* a cannon, right, repurposed?—until I stepped up to Eric. His eyes narrowed.

Finally, after several seconds, he said: "Yeah?"

"I want to stop the fight, make amends," I said. "Quash the beef. Squ—"

"Shut up," said Eric.

"Seriously," I insisted. "I, sorry, I don't like the feeling of people disliking me, I don't like how thorny you are to me, I want to

collapse it, I want to make friends and be on good terms."

"You know what I hate about you Wayfarer? This myopia over every single conversation everyone has with you where you're constantly pausing and looking at us and asking random questions like you think we're *stupid,* like you think that we don't notice that you carry yourself like you're so much better than us, stopping for so many seconds like we're on your clock and you'll only treat us some way because of, because of your absolute, *unmitigated* ego. Call me an egotist if you like but at least I'm not a solipsist like you? You keep trying to make amends but it's all, all a thing for yourself! I just don't want to interact with you! I've clocked you, man! I want you to get away from me, I never want to think about you again. You don't like the feeling of people disliking you? I don't like the feeling of seeing your face in front of me! Just kill yourself! You think that's mean? I'll say it as much as you need to take the hint! Kill yourself kill yourself kill yourself!"

"I," I stopped. He was right, wasn't he? I wasn't... I had never been the kind of person to be able to live in the moment. But he was misrepresenting me, the pausing and thinking wasn't because I didn't value others, was it? Wasn't it? The way that I treated everyone around me, was that all indicative of, of this lack of awareness he was talking about? I felt tears come to my eyes, I was frustrated—

He pushed me and I stumbled back, wobbled. Flailing my arms only served to stabilize me and I recovered and the two of us looked at each other. His face was red, like he was embarrassed, and he breathed heavily, and his eyes—

I looked deep into his eyes. "Eric, Wayfarer," Rudolf said from behind us.

"Just, just learn to lie," I said. "You don't have to be so cruel and hateful to me, if you're on my side, working with me. It'll cause problems, it has to cause problems. I. I traded them for you, fine, okay? I traded Sartaca and Varim and the elf and everyone else for *you* and all you're doing is hating me, I don't deserve this? You're such a jerk, and it's all stemming from your inability to be a hero. Just cause I'm better than you doesn't mean you have to be an asshole!"

I stopped. And I saw in those eyes I was looking deep into:

He felt judged and victimized and blamed and afraid. I saw it all in his eyes. His face suddenly made sense to me. He wasn't an animal; he was Eric.

He started.

"... Stop," I said. "Sorry. Sorry, I..."

Hadn't I proved it to myself then? I really did... believe, on the inside, what Eric was saying, maybe?

"You don't understand," he said.

"I don't," I said.

He stared at me.

"It's my fault," he said.

All I could do was tilt my head.

"I,"

"I'm sorry," I said.

"I want to save them," he said. His voice broke. "I don't feel bad. I don't care. I *don't feel bad,*" he said, pushing back into the

wall. He was retreating from me. But he had nowhere to run. "I don't. I-It's all worth it. It'll be worth it."

"I," I said. "You need help," I said. "Eric, your family... they're being treated like livestock by demons, right? 'Farmers.' I... I,"

His face twisted and he pushed further backwards, on his tiptoes, flattening.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"S-shut up," he said.

"You need *help,*" I said. "You need to communicate, Wienlie, I'm sure Wienlie,"

"No one will help me," he said. "I know that, shut *up* Wayfarer, NO ONE IS COMING TO SAVE ME. And if anyone is I don't want it to be YOU."

His voice was so suddenly loud I stopped. And I broke my gaze, looked down, said:

"Yeah."

"I have to do it myself," he said. His voice grew quieter and quieter. "So just, just stay the fuck out of my way, I'm, I'm not indebted to you or anything, I—" he took a breath.

"Yeah," I said.

"Please," he said.

I stepped back. He sagged and fell, shoulders hunched as he stood there. We stared at each other, unsure, mutually.

Then vines were cut and fell. A bloody silhouette walking upright and prim stepped through.

All of us turned. Our eyes icy-boreal bore holes through air and flesh. I traced her outline. From the boots to the robes to the surrounding array of living crystal to her face which I knew well. Petra stepped into the cave.

"Petra," said Rudolf. "Why are you here?"

"Sorry," said Petra. "I'm just so dazed."

"The incursion," I said. "It went, it went well? Are you, are you hurt, you're covered in blood. Petra ..."

"I'm not," she said. "Wayfarer ... Wayfarer, please listen. Please walk to the back of the cave and, and... pick up your sword."

"Wayfarer," said Rudolf. I looked between he and Petra. He stared down at the box in his hand. I looked between them and made a choice.

Then I turned around. I stepped once, twice, thrice.

Why was Petra back, unharmed, but covered in blood? What was she here for? Why was she saying to pick up my sword? What did Rudolf look alarmed for?

Rudolf had called us when we were fighting and we didn't notice.

"Wayfarer," said Petra.

I walked to the back of the cave. My sword was there, leaning against the wall. A chill had taken hold of my body. It had grabbed my spine and spread its tendrils through my bone and I was frostbitten or burned, all I felt over my entire body was cold —except for my left arm. I felt nothing there. I had sacrificed it for Falida.

"I..."

Rudolf had called us. His eyes had been stricken with terror. He was looking at the box. The other Sundered Acolyte was a houseki. Remember that, mentioned off-hand? Remember how Petra constantly made reference to me continuing on without her? Even though she really, really wanted to be with me? She was covered in blood. That Falida had the power to anomalously fight against a demon that strong for so long. The dread knight. The glinting of red. The ruby had gone out. Sanguine. She was here. She told me to pick up my sword. She was behind me.

I hadn't even considered it. I hadn't even considered every truth. I had been complacent and I had expected that you could just fall through life. Every world cohered into one. Finally it made sense. Everything suddenly made sense now. She was behind me. Petra was behind me.

The enemy was behind me.

I reached out and grabbed the sword.

"... Hello," I said, "Falida," my grip tightened, "Second Sundered Acolyte."

I turned around and heard an awful noise.

Rudolf's box fell on the floor. His hands shivered, and then slowly moved up to his chest. From it protruded a crystal spiral. The spiral shivered, twisted. Blood exploded outward. His body trembled.

Wracked.

"Hiya, Wayfarer," said Petra. "Falida says hiya."

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Petra, no, Falida, dread knight. The rider, dread knight. The dread knights were Sundered Acolytes. That was all. Petra stood behind Rudolf. Slowly the spiral in his chest retracted. Blood spattered on the ground. It was over. It was all, all over. Falida orbited around Petra.

Rudolf collapsed on the ground.

Eric drew his sword and ran at her. Light flashed reflective and he was restrained, gripped, held securely like baby bird in human's grip (ready to crush!) and Falida squeezed his arms and *splinter-splinter!* Blood fell on the floor. Eric screamed and stumbled.

My crystal arm unbidden wrapped around my right arm, my human arm. It supported the blade in my hand that I held, level, in a guarding position. I sucked a breath in. Petra looked at me. Her eyes gleamed.

"So," she finally said.

"..."

The gleaming ruby of the box no longer gleamed. Wienlie had fallen somehow. It was over.

I raised the sword.

"Petra," I said.

"Wayfarer," she looked at me, tilted her head, smiled softly. "You understand, right?"

"Why...?"

The sword trembled in my hands. I couldn't do anything. I was frozen.

She tilted her head at Falida. "Just ... how life shook out."

"Break your promise with her," I said.

"I chose," Petra languidly swiped her hand. Eric was twisted and fell into the ground. He was alright, right? He groaned.

I stumbled back. Petra advanced.

"You chose," I repeated.

"It wasn't a lie," Petra said. She smiled. Desperation crept into her voice. "None of it was a lie. None of it at all, Wayfarer."

"Who even are you," I said, distraught.

"I'm Petra," she said.

"You kept... you kept talking like you'd die, but..."

"Wayfarer," she said.

I breathed in and out. My breathing was heavy and I looked away. Then my head whipped back to her. "Did you kill all of them?"

Silence.

"I didn't," whispered Petra. She said nothing more.

I stared at her. "How ..." I trailed off, I couldn't find the tone, I couldn't, I...

"How..."

I was so exhausted.

"How many."

"All but two," whispered Petra. She smiled an unknowable smile. "I'm... I'm sorry, so sorry."

"Who...?"

"Well, we fought through... thick and thin, and only some of us were left... and, with my dark magic, I placed a curse on Linie and inverted her healing. *That* dealt with all but her. Wienlie... escaped with his moon ability. I wounded Linie. I don't know if she's still alive. Probably the beasts of Sunder..."

I stared at her and inhaled, then I exhaled.

"They killed her," I said.

"They probably raped her before that," said Petra immediately. "Sunder targets women."

"Oh my god," I said. "Oh my god," I looked down at the floor. I breathed heavily. Slowly Falida orbited.

"Wayfarer," said Petra softly.

"You lied," I said. "You aren't... you aren't..."

"I never lied, Wayfarer," said Petra. She reached a hand toward me, I swung the blade, hit her hand with the flat side, she drew it back. The tiniest drop of blood ran down and fell and hit the floor. "I never, never ever ever lied to you. Not, not about who I was. I'm the same person. My identity is the same, it's just, it's the circumstances that changed, I'm still the same person you always knew."

"Shut up," I said. "Stop. Stop, I need to think."

Falida orbited.

Rudolf lay motionless in a pool of spreading blood.

Eric trembled on the floor with both his arms shattered.

Petra stood and watched me.

I took a shaking breath in. I was trying not to cry. But I felt it, didn't I? Hot tears in my eyes again, again, again, I was always crying, I was such a, such a stupid fucking idiot, all I did was cry. And I relied on everyone else and now, and now...

What could I do? The sword clattered to the ground. I couldn't keep it in my hands, I raised them, mirroring Rudolf just before, raised them up to my mouth. My eyes twitched.

I vomited into my hands, doubled over. I vomited. Horrible torrential rations of jerky taken from camp and the food from before and everything else spewed and spilled out onto the ground. Petra stood in front of me, watching. The vomit fell split-splat onto cave floor.

"Wayfarer," said Petra, kindly.

I cried. Tears fell from my face and ran into my mouth and mixed with the vomit and bile or the remnants of such that still drifted out, spooling, spooling out like thread. Sine waves of drool and vomit.

"Wayfarer, pick up your sword..."

The sword's handle laid in the vomit.

"Or kick it away."

I stared into the vomit on the floor.

"You have to make a choice, Wayfarer," said Petra.

"I can't choose," I said. I gagged. I smelled my own vomit. More came up, upsurging. It was red. Was it bloody? Or, then... "I can't," I expelled more slurry. "I can't choose," I panted.

"You have to choose."

"I've never been able to choose," I said. "I can't choose between anyone. I can't choose my future. I can't choose who I am. I can't choose to stand up. I can't choose."

"Then I'll kill them all," said Petra softly. "Not Falida, me. I will, Wayfarer. I'll slaughter Eric right in front of you. And Rudolf, is he still alive? He seems to be on the edge of death if so, anyway. I'll heal him and disassemble him. I'll take all his digits first."

"Why are you like this," I sobbed.

"I can't choose either," said Petra. "I'm Falida's. You're free, Wayfarer."

"I've never been free," I said.

"Remember what I said before?"

My fingers scraped along the stone. My eyes screwed up and I cried.

"'If you want to succeed, you have to do whatever it takes. Extinguish whichever little flame of the heart you must.' That's what I said."

I couldn't move. I was trapped by chains unliving. Rock stone and metal and iron clad around me and I sobbed and I sobbed

and I sobbed, I couldn't stop, I was useless. And unto your end you shall go, Wayfarer. Why did everything only get worse? Why was it like this?

"Stop crying in your own vomit, Wayfarer," her voice lined with an edge of steel. "Listen! This world is a world of sacrifice. To exist in this world you must make a choice. You must give up something to get something in return. This world is a world of sacrifice. Look at your arm, Wayfarer."

The crystal arm. Vomit pooled around it.

"You've traded yourself."

I pulled a breath in and grabbed the sword out of the pool of vomit and stood up and slashed, and Falida zipped in front of my blade and deflected. I stumbled, swung it again, again, again, and each time Falida blocked it. There was no chance I'd get through. Petra stood there. I swiped and Falida parried me and I stumbled back, barely managing to keep my hands on the sword.

I breathed heavily. "Shut, shut up, shut up shut up shut up," I slashed. Falida let this one through. Petra sidestepped and the blade clanged against inner Falida. She grabbed my arm in an iron grip. We were less than a foot away from each other. I struggled, shaking.

"You haven't made your choice," she said finally. "You're just, you're just angry. You're emotional. You can't run away so you're lashing out. Is that right?"

"Stop it," I said. I lifted the blade again and brought it down; it barely moved a foot before it crashed into Falida again. She was totally invincible.

"Petra," I sobbed. I struggled with the blade. Falida slowly began to grow over it. We were both inside of the orbiting, floating ring of Falida, now. "I don't understand. Help me understand you. I just want to understand. This, this," I yanked the blade out. Tiny pieces of Falida turned into blood.

Petra gritted her teeth. I swung the blade again, clumsily. She stepped back. "What don't you understand, Wayfarer?"

"Why, Petra?" I stared down at the hilt soaked with vomit sopping dripping drip drip down like that tiny cut on Petra's hand. "Why can't you choose differently…?"

Petra stared at me. In her eyes was a bleak sadness. She smiled.

"Please, Petra, I, I still, I still like you, I still love you, even if it's not real or if it's just puppy love or if it's just fresh or new," my voice broke, "please, why? Why is it this way? Why can't you choose? Why can't you choose to get away from Sunder and, and come with me, and we can go to your home in Lan Foulier, Ouleid," I stopped, then continued, "—so *please* please why can't we? Please," I felt my voice falter completely.

She stared at me sadly, so sadly.

"… I've made the sacrifices I've had to make," she said finally. "I'm so sorry. I wish it was different."

"Why can't you just tell me," I said finally. I was still crying. I felt it. Lines running down my cheeks, washing blood and dirt away.

"My parents were killed by fate, you know," she said suddenly.

"And you,"

"And I was maimed. I made a glorious sacrifice. To Falida."

I stared at her through tears.

"And that's all," she said. "That's all. I have no choice because I made mine already. Once you've sacrificed you can never, *ever* go back."

"Petra," I said.

"I love you," she said.

"Petra..."

"There are only two options now," she said. She stepped back. My sword trembled.

The two of us met on equal grounds. The air around us grew dimmer and darker and dimmer and deader and dead dead dead until there was inside the dimness only the two of us. Petra and I. I breathed heavily. Petra stood.

"I'm making my choice right now," she whispered. In the backdrop of anguished cries and sobs and inhalations and exhalations and Eric dying and Rudolf dying and Wayfarer dying there was only Petra. Only her. Only her in my entire world. Singular, unduplicated, aduplicated, synecdoche of love.

She was so much stronger than me. I saw her.

I want you and to be loved and to have a place, and I hate this life, I hate this world, but I'll stay in it, I'll survive. Please, Wayfarer, please. Please act out this charade. Please make your choice. Please.

"If you love me. If, if you love me, then choose. Choose: join me and Falida on the side of Sunder," she said.

"Or, as you were put here to do, kill me."

019 / **** *me*

She shifted one foot back and pointed a long pointer finger toward me. I looked to the side. Rudolf on the ground through diffracted refracted mirror-lens crystal struggled. He was alive. He had been pierced but not fatally so.

Falida sharpened into a speartip.

I held the sword in my hands.

Action and inaction.

I couldn't choose.

I couldn't kill Petra. I loved her. I needed her. The speartip lunged forward—I wasn't fast enough to parry it. But my Falida was; she morphed into a shield and the two clashed. No, they didn't clash. Petra's Falida... morphed into mine ...

"I'm taking over yours," said Petra.

I sucked in a breath.

"I'll force the pact this way," she said. "Come on, Wayfarer. Fight back. Fight, Wayfarer. Fight."

"Stop," I said.

"I can't stop," said Petra. "I've, I've made this sacrifice. Why don't you understand?? This world is a world where people who should love each other fall into opposition and cross-purposes, and we kill each other, and it's awful, and we can't do anything

about it. It'll never get better. Can't you understand? Sometimes there is no reconciliation. Sometimes there is no clever munchkinry, contract manipulation, that can pull you out of hell. I'm in hell, Wayfarer."

I swung the sword limply with one hand. Falida caught it. A slow encasing grew.

"I'm in hell, so why won't you just do this for me and play this horrible game?" she said.

"What, what does that..."

"Why won't you try your hardest to kill me," she said. "And we'll try our hardest to beat you and make you surrender. You have to kill me."

She had given up.

If she couldn't kill me, then it was over. She had already lost. No matter how long I took to kill her, her death was guaranteed. I stared at her.

Tears ran down her cheeks. "Kill me, Wayfarer, please, just end it all. Just kill me. Please...!"

She had already lost. But somehow I didn't feel good. I felt awful.

"Falida will try her hardest and I'll try my hardest. Please, Wayfarer. Please. And, and you know, maybe if you don't kill me, it'll be better, because I'll be with you. I'll force you to be with me. I'll finally have someone else. I'm lonely, so lonely. I want to die all the time. I want to die off. Please, be with me. Or kill me. Just make your choice Wayfarer. Please, I'm sorry, please forgive me—" her voice broke off.

My gaze fell until it was at the sword, slick with vomit, in my hand again.

I thought about Cera. I thought about how I used her. I thought about how I couldn't make that choice. I couldn't end it. I couldn't begin it. I was too scared either way. I was too scared to make a choice.

Who was I? Was I the potential me inside? There was a me inside of myself inside of my dreams inside of me. There was a Wayfarer spread out so that everyone could see him. He was like me without my all-corrupting evil. No, then what was he? He couldn't have been me. Because I was nothing.

I was Wayfarer without identity or meaning. All I could do was use and spoil. I was disgusting. I couldn't make that choice. Because I was comfortable like that, even if it hurt others. I was a manipulator, and a coward, and a freak.

Petra pled with me to die. I had to make the choice to kill her. Or else I would join her. With Sunder. And then we'd kill everyone else. Did I care?

She wanted to die.

I wanted to be with her.

I slowly realized it. I was making my choice. I felt the Falida on my arm dwindle away. Somehow I sensed her. Somehow I sensed her life disappear. I was making my choice to be with Petra.

But she was sobbing.

She didn't want to live any longer.

There was no life ahead for her. There was nothing that could be done. Even if there was, there was no way we could do it here. In this small cave.

I had been backed up to the wall of the cave. We stood.

Please.

She wanted to die. She wanted to be free. She told me in clear words, to kill her. It wasn't that she expected to *be killed,* I realized, when she said all those things about dying, when she gave her my address. She wanted to kill herself. She wanted to end her life, by the hand of another. Because Falida wouldn't let her.

Please.

Did I love Petra, really, or did I just love the way she made me feel?

I looked deep inside myself.

Was there an answer? What was my true belief? What did I really feel?

I was crying again.

"P-Petra," I said finally. The crystal arm pulsed for the second to last time. "Petra, I've, I've made my choice."

Petra smiled at me and her face screwed up and she couldn't stop crying. Everyone was dying. Death came for us all. No one would survive. I had made my choice.

I stood in liminal space.

The stretched woman said:

"Congratulations."

19.5 / blue star

1 - Mika

The stars are ultrablue. Ultraviolet is such a weird word; it describes the section of the color spectrum above (or below?) violet; where color totally stops being visible at all. UV rays can damage your skin, so you have to remember to apply a Blessing to yourself when you're caring for your skin! Every day, Petra, every day, remember that. Even if you don't remember your last name, you'll have your Light at least, like every woman above you and like every woman below you. Remember you have the ability to bless...

Haha. That's right! You'll unlock your Light when your attribute stabilizes. At that point you'll fade into the crowd too.

Well. In a village like this, with its size... it's hard to fade into any crowds. It's been kept small for a reason; that a village under the jurisdiction of Clockwork would ally with the forces of conceptual chaos... well! *Well!* Demons are discriminated-against personages, for good reason. So the operation has to stay small.

Others don't like to talk about this stuff, but poor Petra's never ever been good at saying what people want... you've never been able to grasp that. It's like... everyone is simply a process that moves irrespective of you, right? No, you're not explaining it well. Whatever...

You do need them, though. Even if it's really, really hard for you to get when they don't know or understand something... you like

to think you're dependent on others, but you know that's not true. It can't be true. Ummm, alienation's a thing that precludes dependence.

Aha. Anyway... these stars are ultra*blue*. Yes, you can't see their light, but—well, they're so convincingly blue it's hard to see them as anything different. Everyone in the village agrees. That the stars are blue is certain...

The demons have an interest in the creation of this ultrablue color. That's why they've erected the church like they have. An impossible spiral upward of glass and carbon fiber; built to capture and refract the light over the village. Make magnificent and holy it all, everything...

Mika's atheism makes it scary.

Wait wait wait. Come on, don't rush. Let's set the scene. You're talking with your father, right now, even though you're so old, fifteen, you have your head in his lap like you're a tiny child, he's stroking it, isn't it such a weird dynamic, wait. Wait.

"It's that church," he says. "That damn church."

"What about the church...?" you say, drowsily.

"There's something about it," he says. "You weren't alive when it was erected, when they came. But..."

"Mmh," is all you can reply with. His hand stops gracing your head and suddenly you're shifted off his lap. He paces frequently, that's what he's doing now.

"Is it about the unreal aspect...?" you say. That the church is an impossible structure is well-known—anyone who's gone up

inside, for it's open to the public, notices it instantly. What it supports and the space inside cannot be real.

"No," says your father. "But its effects... its effects, yes. The church serves as a sort of... sort of distraction... by making itself unreal, it makes this village... around us... more real. But even this village..."

You only remember this now because it came up later. When you were talking with Mika. You realized the way that she laughs and smiles about it all, with such a devil-may-care attitude... it's sort of similar, isn't it? That the church makes the surrounding so much more real... so too does Mika's recklessness and sarcasm make her truth more real?

But really, you never knew Mika?

But really, you never did.

"Hah," says Mika. "The stars? What about them? A damn psyop —psychological operation. Bet you didn't know that word? I heard it from one of the adventurers passing through to go to church."

She was so vulgar. Her personality seemed to splice in two; one for the adults and one for you, Petra. It felt nice, that you were able to see a side of her so treasured and secret; it felt nice that she would open this wound in herself for you, and allow you to watch her insides pulse.

But beneath every truth is a truer truth, right?

It comes once a month, the solar rotation in which the stars lose (and gain, regain, redouble) their colors, lossy dropoff pixels (melty, droopy) recirculating, decoherence intensifying until suddenly they snap back into position but maybe with a slight

warp [weft, waver]. And they're colorless except for the ultrablue. The colorless blue you know is blue.

Yeah... it doesn't matter how actually blue they are, as long as you know them to be blue?

Mika's atheism, her inability to see this blue, made her scary. You remember her. Faintly, of course, but you can trace that single thread back to Michan. But you *really* need to establish how monumental this atheism was. That a girl like Mika otherwise so perfect, top of the line, a beaut; perhaps the most proper girl in the village? that a girl like her had such fundamental inability to believe ...

Did you love Mika? (*What?*)

I said did you love her. You're such a hopeless romantic. I know you can love people in so many different ways that the question isn't worth asking but I'm asking it anyway. Did you?

(*I did.*)

There was something about her that you remember being struck by, maybe it was the natural way she positioned herself, or the way she hiked up her skirt to go wading in the pond, the one that only went up to the barest bottoms of your shins. "You're so silly," you'd shriek, following her, she'd look back at you. You'd catch a glimpse of the way her hair exploded out, insane particle motion inevitably resulting in a case of sopping mophead.

It was that pond where everything first faltered. Trace that single thread, back to the very wound that hurt most.

Mika was unapproachable in a way. The way she forced responses from people was customary; it drove them off. But you couldn't stop yourself, could you? You chased after her,

even if she was scared of you. By the train station, you remember her telling you she was scared of you, because she lived near there, could see out the windows.

There was something about her that made her so necessary, even though she was unapproachable.

That's whatever now, isn't it? It doesn't matter. If you wind the skein, you reach it—that day, you woke up. A lot of people would put some undue aspect of narrative here, a day where nothing felt the same afterwards, but it did feel the same. It was the same, even if there was something missing. Something so awful.

You remember crawling on your hands and knees through the blackest black inside that pond, soaked through, to the bone (humans are 60% water? Then why is it so cold?) and finding a body, twisted. And you remember wondering how long it took for her to die as you ran your hands along the side of her head. As you realized the wet you felt there wasn't water.

2 - Ultrablue Nonexistent

You remember sometimes flashing back to that moment, removing it from her body. The stone, indistinguishable in the black and red from ruby, garnet, fluorite, cuprite, and yet singular, somehow. The stone remained. You pulled it out and out, it was lodged in there, but something had overtaken you. Some *animus;* a compulsion, not a desire but a need or obsession, pushing you blindly unto one predetermined goal. The extraction of the stone from Mika's corpse.

Corpse? Wasn't she alive? No. She was dead. Dead before you found her; it wasn't algae you pushed past in the water, crawling so pathetically, it was grey matter, masses of agglomerated accumulated brains spilled out in such a way entropic so as to

cut off all life or activity in the transference tunnel between Mika's soul and body.

You pulled it out. That's what we had said. Stuff dripped, dropped from it, sloughed from it back onto Mika's body which convulsed.

What happened after?

Days without Mika passed. No suspicion came to you. They believed you; they didn't confiscate the stone you had hidden inside your message bags. They believed you that Mika had—had an accident—she wouldn't do anything untoward, right? Or maybe they just didn't care. People like Mika were so thoroughly baffling to people who could see ultrablue. That someone could be so successful on all other measures of life, and yet not have something so core to human experience.

That night, something shattered inside you. You could no longer see any color in the stars, not without Mika.

3 - Thread

"You've been different. So different. It, it hurts me, you know? It hurts our family, those bonds we built so that we were one cohesive unit, one against the world, against all—1 against x."

"Um... umm, you don't have to express any concern for me, okay? I'm fine... seriously!"

I'm fine.

My family was never restrictive. They never stopped me from doing anything. Maybe they stopped me from being able to grow, with the ways they constantly pressed in around me. But maybe that was the village's fault, too. Maybe the way this ultrablue society destroys people who can't see its light... no, not maybe. It's certainly a bad thing. I just wish they understood me. I wish they understood Mika. If they had understood Mika, they—

If—if only I had made Mika need me the same way I needed her—

*But it was just a sad accident, wasn't it? There's nothing so sad as s—*self-inflicted death *in this village. That's what our society ran from. That's why we settled in this field with its ultrablue stars.*

I need *her, I need things. And, and it hurts me that I—*

I need someone to pull the thread to rescue me from this world.

I'm so lonely, so cold.

4 - Contract

Carriage explosive, shatter-scattered across the canyon floor. Blood seeps through and around the splintered wood. Stones made to dash heads against. Heads dashed against stones, predetermined, ordained. Their bodies littered, torn apart. All dead, not like Mika, who floated in the water, Mika for whom death was impossible. Mika who no one understood, no one understood whether she was alive—or—

Your vision floats in and out. Spasm; jellyfish. *Help me,* you think to yourself. *Help me.*

Help me.

Drifting away like this is so nice. Falling from so high, dashed against rocks. Is this what Mika felt, when she died?

Petra.

Do you want to make a contract with me?

You can't die like Mika. You can't die unfulfilled. You need someone to help you, you need to find someone still. You'll do whatever it takes to keep on going. Please...

Can't your family stay alive? No, that was never in the cards.

Once you die, you're dead forever. No atheism required.

020 / love sign sine wave

"I can't do it again," I said.

The stretched woman regarded me dispassionately still.

"You... Cera," I said. "I can't do it again. No. No, can't take it, I, I know this'll hurt me, this will, but I can't, just now I have to finally end it, I have to, or else I'll be..."

I'll be.

I breathed in. And out.

"What is... this place...?"

"It is Only Important As It Means To You," replied the stretched woman. "Colloquially known as the dream world or the daydream zone. The border where reality frays and the ego, id, identity takes place as the supremity of being."

She swayed on the tree branch and began to hum. I looked around and around.

"Is, is time..."

"There is no time here," said the woman. "We perceive it in limited instances. Chunked sections of time of a given length running all at once."

That was... kind of like I had heard LLMs thought, right? Totally off and nonpresent except for when they had to run, to generate the words. So we were in this chunked space, where no time would pass. And it was of indeterminate length, and I

assumed... I assumed the length was as long as it would take to...

"What are you... here for?"

"You made a choice," said the woman.

"Yeah," I said. "When I go back, will I... still have the will to... no, will I even have the ability to carry it out...?"

"You'll have the ability you need," said the woman. "The will, though..."

My eyes traced the glowing tree.

"This is where the geist comes," I realized. "You're evaluating me."

"Inside of your heart is a dispersed wave," said the woman. "Its amplitude is low and its signal is static. Look."

She gestured at me. From my chest unspooled gold cord, moving up, down, a sine wave. "The inside of your heart emits a sine wave signal to the whole world," said the woman. "Everyone has it. It's just small for some people. Like it is for you. It might be suppressed or interrupted, because it isn't a very powerful wave."

"What is it...?"

"A signal," said the woman. "Of yourself. Of your potential, I suppose you could say."

"What constitutes it?"

She smiled softly. "Your perceptions, it's likely. When the sine wave reaches the point where its signal penetrates from your

inner walls—the temple of the self—you enter Only Important As It Means To You. You require ... more work to amplify. We have as much time as you need."

"Who are you?" I said.

"You can try and guess, if you like," she said. "But I can't tell you yet, Wayfarer. Come on. Let's talk about the choice you made."

She couldn't tell me. I nodded, slowly, then quicker.

What choice did you make, Wayfarer?

"... I chose to try to kill Petra."

Why did you make that choice?

"She asked me to."

That's not why you made that choice.

"Isn't it?"

You needed something else to sacrifice her like that.

"You're talking about... something inside, right...?"

Who are you, Wayfarer?

"I'm..."

...

"I'm *scum*. Is that what you want to hear so badly? Maybe tomorrow I'll... maybe tomorrow I'll assume the mask that'll make me not scum, but today that's what I am. So unclouded, so clear."

Why?

"There isn't a genuine bone in my body."

You don't genuinely love Petra? You didn't genuinely have affection for Cera?

"I... I just used them. Both of them, Petra and Cera, for me. And Cera ... I tried to destroy the identity that she had made. I never said that, I... I tried to destroy her identity and replace it with mine. I... without any power over her romantic or platonic I told her she ought not exist, because..."

Then why did you make that choice?

"I... whenever I'm in relationships with others, I try to subordinate them like that. I... I hate it so much. I don't understand why I do it but I can't stop it, it hurts me to try to stop and I don't want it to not hurt, because—because—"

You aren't scum.

"I don't have anything inside. I can't figure out who I am and what I love and what I believe."

I don't think you used them, Wayfarer. You loved them.

"Then why did I treat them like that?"

What are you feeling, right now?

"I don't... I don't know."

Search inside yourself, Wayfarer. What is it that animates you?

"I... I'm... scared. I'm scared. No. That can't be it. That there's a reason for it all, a reason *like that*..."

You don't want to be left or abandoned.

"I, I... It's, if someone with a spark like *them* knew who I really was, went uncrippled, I..."

You'd be left, right?

"Yeah. Yeah, they'd realize I don't have anything inside, and they'd go away. I really am so—so valueless? Ha. Haha, hahah, there's no reason for anyone to want to be around me at all, much less *love me*. And so, and so it's all just, testing them, prodding them, accelerating it and trying to slash them until they leave me, like a test. I'm so, so..."

You're scared.

"It's so awful that someone like me can be treated at all like this. Can't you just condemn me? I'm so, so guilty. I just hurt other people, that's all I can do, all I'm capable of doing."

I can't condemn you, Wayfarer! I'm just here to ask questions of you, and let you discover yourself.

"I hate it so much. Thinking of who I am."

But you can change that. You can change who you are. You just have to acknowledge what you are right now, see it objectively, right?

"Objectively? Is there a way to take a measurement or accurate assessment of my soul through a lens as clouded as mine?"

You can trust Petra, who understands you, can't you? Petra sees you. Petra can't hate you.

"But Cera didn't hate me either."

You aren't a person to be hated, yet. You're going down an evil path, you know, but it's possible for you to change that. So

acknowledge yourself, Wayfarer!

"I, I,"

Then what is it you seek?

"I need. I need to connect with others, I know I do. But I'm so, so scared? I need it, but I know it'll hurt them."

That's why you said everything to Petra. That's why you have such an issue. That's why you needed to be broken down before your sine wave could come through the temple of your body. A radio wave connects continents, you know! To reconnect, you had to be broken down, until the sine wave was visible. Until you finally had the ability to show yourself.

"I..."

Why did you make that choice?

"I didn't want to hurt or use her anymore. I wanted to cut off all the awful connections and let her free from me and everything else. I hate myself. So I..."

Is that it?

"I was bending her toward me. Wasn't I like a black hole absorbing her light? She's so numinous... and I'm—"

You know that she wanted to be with you? She wanted you. She understood. You weren't evil, Wayfarer. You weren't that way with her. You changed, even if you still hurt, into someone different, more harmless than with Cera. Maybe like Eric said you're still a solipsist. But that isn't as bad, is it?

I was crying again.

"I needed the power to make her understand me. I needed the power to fix all the things I couldn't fix just by myself. I made the choice because I wanted her to understand that I loved her. I want her to understand it. I want it to be true. I want..."

The golden wave radiating out jumped and its amplitude expanded and expanded again.

So then say it Wayfarer. Say everything that you want, that you're too scared to make true. Acknowledge it, and...!

"I want to actualize the self I wish I was," I said. **"I want to make people understand me. I want to be able to communicate with them and be true and not be hurt! I want to reconnect to everyone I lost by retreating into myself! And I never, never want to hurt someone with inaction and clever manipulation ever again!"**

I felt something settle inside of me. From on high a presence came and latched itself onto my soul, or, no, the golden sine wave—it burst with light, swayed no longer precariously and erratically but rotated in three dimensions, no, it was a spiral and a sine wave at once. It was...

A second spirit inside me awoke. A cutout figure with starry cosmos surround. It looked down at me with beautiful eyes. I understood it, even though I couldn't see it.

"This is really who you wish to actualize into?" said the woman.

I nodded. "It is. It is!"

The chains surrounding my soul which were iron and barren exploded with flame and became living, and burrowed into my skin. The Geist stepped toward me.

In reality I opened my eyes. Synchronization occurred.

MIDNIGHT LINE CONNECT

You'll go far, Wayfarer! You'll try your hardest, *and unto your end you shall go*.

I pulled a breath in. Midnight Line Connect. That was the name of my ability. The same as Tio's regal commands, or Sartaca's straight lines, it was an ability. And it was an ability that would lead me from Exodus into the promised land.

I used the ability reflexively, as naturally as I breathed.

Time spread out. Stars spread out around me. All the blacks had the tiniest white specks playing in their wholes. I looked around; no! I didn't. I was disembodied. The Wayfarer in front of me was frozen. Everyone was frozen.

[0/2]

At the top right of my field of view, there was, in bracketed text, a counter. Zero out of two. It was rendered in stark white. Highlighted white as well were:

1. Petra, reaching toward me. I knew her face had to be desperate but the white highlight destroyed its detail. She had no face in this state...

2. Falida, spearing into my own. An orbiting array defending Petra from attack.

3. Falida on my arm. Tiny! Her highlight was cut away by the greater Falida's. The transformation was imminent. Forced pacting was imminent.

4. Rudolf, chugging a potion on the ground. He had a healing potion? Leaning against the wall.

5. Eric, arms broken, twisted on the floor.

I slowly breathed in, or I didn't breathe at all. No oxygen entered my lungs, I could feel that much. Zero out of two. Two what?

I needed to think and I needed to communicate. Think, communicate. Think, communicate. My situation could be overcome as long as I thought and I communicated. It could all be surpassed inevitably. Think.

The ability could be used to surpass this situation. That much was certain, or at least the stretched woman whose head blurred said it could. And it had something to do with communication. I sucked a breath in.

I knew instantly what I could do.

"Falida," I said in dreamworld dialect. *"Make a contract with me."*

[1/2]

The number had changed. My Falida's body lost its highlight. Detail was visible again.

I ghosted over to Rudolf.

"Rudolf," I said. *"Use the magic plug as a cannon."*

[2/2]

[END TURN?]

What would be the consequences if I said yes? If I made the choice...

"... Yes," I said.

[3]

A countdown.

[2]

What came after this

[1]

Was my choice.

Rudolf guzzled the healing potion. He wasted some, of course; it fell down his chin soppy-sloppy and stained his shirt and everything and pooled over his body but did that matter? The potion had enough for two...

He had hid it as best as he could from the others. Didn't want to use it on Eric. Wanted to keep it for himself, just in case. And he had done it. It had come in handy, hadn't it? He chuckled. It was the ultimate proof...

No. It wasn't the ultimate proof of his internal treachery. He had stayed with Eric, hadn't he? Fought the rider for Eric? It was a strategic move.

Petra and Wayfarer were talking. Falida slowly orbited and there came the occasional sound of a clash. He saw Wayfarer's feet, the way he stumbled, his awful form. There was no way Wayfarer would be able to win. Why hadn't Petra killed him yet?

Why hadn't she sacrificed Eric to Falida, entered her Benedict Arnold form, and killed him?

Something changed—

"Rudolf. Use the magic plug as a cannon."

Rudolf pulled in a breath. Who was that? It... Wayfarer? Was that Wayfarer's voice? No, don't focus on stupid stuff like that! The magic cannon sat with its barrel pointed out of the cave. Slowly he began to crawl.

He pulled himself aching along dead stone. His fingers scrabbled and clawed on the ground. Slowly, slowly, he crawled. Rudolf heard a clash noncommittal. Neither of them had the guts or spirit to end the fight. But if he could *totally shatter Falida...*

Immediately after exiting Midnight Line Connect I entered stopped time again.

This was my gamble. Labyrinth Climbers had rules on successive turns of time slowing or time stoppage for characters, perceptive abilities, etc. Characters, especially low-level ones, without enough Fortitude to expand time-stopping domains or abilities multiple times faced mental breakdown.

There was no way I had enough Fortitude. But I don't forget anything, you know! I have Historian on my side. And the thing that I didn't forget—Unbreakable. Unbreakable held the key. It would allow me, hopefully, to ignore the mental effects of successive time-stoppage—in Midnight Line Connect and the contract realm.

So I entered stopped time again. And my gamble paid off. I felt fine.

Fuck yes, I thought.

Wayfarer.

"Falida," I said. I looked around for her presence. The contract realm, just as it was in the server, was a long, massive puddle of reflective liquid, with a bright sky. The puddle was an inch deep, but extended out as far as the eye could see in any direction. I turned around: Falida was there.

She appeared as a circle; no, not a circle. A circular polygon with many sides, that I could see but not count. And I definitely couldn't recognize its shape. She was totally clear.

I didn't have an arm.

You wish to make a contract with me in this moment. I have ignored you until now for my own purposes. I have been following Petra's order to keep you alive. But...

"You won't stay alive yourself if you let the other Falida kill you," I said.

Yes.

"Are you a Sundered Acolyte?"

Yes. I can claim connection to Sunder. The bond is unable to be broken. With sacrifice Sunder linked my mother to him and I am of the blood and body of my mother.

"I don't want to make the contract Petra made with you."

...

"Okay. I'm not trying to antagonize. Just hear me out, okay?"

I am listening, Wayfarer. I always listen.

"Falida is trying to take you over psychologically, not physically, right? Invade your thoughts with hers. There's no blood, that's why I think that, no blood being forced out to indicate your shattering."

This is correct.

"Okay," I said. "Make a contract with me to share the psychological strain with me. Instead of having to face your own doom let me face it. I'll be able to take it."

You are mortal.

"I don't care," I said. "That's my special ability. If my mind breaks you can go back to fighting like normal. In fact, let's add a stipulation to the contract—if my mind breaks, you gain control of my body."

...

"Make this contract with me," I said. "Please. I'll deal with all the consequences of you being an Acolyte. I'll help you. If you help me. Mutual connection. I'll put myself on the line for you and I. I'll make the gamble. So you make the contract."

[Vow: Glorious Sacrifice] WAYFARER SHALL TAKE THE PSYCHOLOGICAL ONUS OF ANY ATTACKS PLACED UPON FALIDA FOR ALL TIME. IF WAYFARER'S MIND BREAKS, THEN FALIDA SHALL TAKE CONTROL OF HIS BODY AND MENTAL FACULTIES.

"... Can we change your name from Falida? This'll get confusing."

No. We will refer to the other Falida by the alternate appellation: 'The Enemy.'

"Okay," I said. "I accept this glorious sacrifice."

The contract realm disappeared.

SUBMIT SUBMIT

Instantly I was faced with psychological pressure. I stumbled. The enemy continued to gnaw at my arm, sending thought after thought into my Falida SUBMIT SUBMIT SUBMIT SUBMIT SUBMIT constant messages of SUBMISSION sent straight into my head. I let them. I had to not resist. They pierced through my skull and through and through layers of flesh and fat and blood spattering and right into—

An Unbreakable core. You know the classic problem? What happens when an irresistible force meets an immovable wall? The thing about that problem is that it's playing word games. Immovable walls are irresistible forces. And in this world, right now, *there was only one immovable wall:* my own brain.

The enemy smashed into me with her signals but could not break me. I sheltered Falida within my own immovable wall. My mind was my property! This was why I chose Unbreakable. It was *my mind,* and no one could *ever make me stop thinking*.

I pushed my unbreakable core forward into signal symbol and synecdoche. It became an irresistible force. I shattered through layers and layers of the enemy like a wrecking ball. She SCREECHED, sent psychological attacks my way but I obliterated them handily, with the unbreakable core, and she suddenly started to recede, to hide, even within herself she hid, drawing back and back and back and back—

Something came through. Something pushed through. What was that? Through thorns and hateful signals something pure came through. Some connection—

"I'm going to kill you now," I said. "You let me connect to you. That's what I'm best at. I'm sorry. At least I'll make it quick this time."

Don't kill me.

"I'm sorry," I said.

I charged into her. She dissolved into static, screaming, screeching, wounding, wounding, I couldn't chase her down fully because my mind was not as *large* but I could *torture her, send holes through and through.*

Petra's eyes widened in reality. I swung my blade down. Shaking the enemy raised a tendril and barely blocked it. I cut, I cut, I cut through, The enemy realized I was attacking so her only option was to recede or fight back, and what would she choose, but something was coming—

Don't kill me. Don't kill me. Don't kill me. Don't kill me don't kill me don't kill me don't kill me don't kill me don't kill me don't—

Waves crashed against the ocean. Someone sat there, in the sea. Blood ran down her arm. Beside her was a corpse. Red from its head spilled out into the sea, had long spilled out, had dyed the area around it in a static halo. That corpse would never disappear, I suddenly felt. It or its concept would be held onto for the rest of time, lodged in memory.

I laid on my back. My hair spread out in its own halo. The woman sitting in the sea suddenly stood, with her hair falling in dense and tangled coils. She turned to look at me. Buried in her chest, next to her heart but not straight through, was a red spear. Impalement, pinned point...

"You've made your choice," she said.

I stared at her.

"How..."

"I tried *really,* really hard... you know, Falida and I don't have totally separate minds. That's how we can talk and think to each other. So it wasn't super hard to jump over through the connection you two had made."

She smiled wistfully at me. "We don't have very much time, though..."

"Wh... why? Why don't we?"

"Ummm, well... this isn't the contract realm, where everything's frozen. Our brains are sped up so quickly for sure. But... well, I suppose yours can take this indefinitely? Mine's frying. Aha."

"That's Falida," I finally said. My eyes flitted to the corpse. But Petra's gaze was locked on me, and I felt... compelled. I had to talk to her. I couldn't waste this.

"Yes," said Petra. "Her thorns are through my whole soul. Like I said. Once you've *really* made a choice, you can never ever go back on it. ... And you. I see you've made a choice."

"Yeah," I said. "Y-yeah, I have made my choice."

"Then you're gonna end it," said Petra.

"Isn't there another way? Can't I, can't I tear that from your chest and, and we can go, Petra, we can... there seriously isn't another way? Isn't there a future where we can maybe spend some time together, the next months or the next year, or the time after that, go back to where you live, and read those stories together? Isn't there a future where you can learn everything about me, and I can learn everything about you? Isn't there a single tiny chance...?"

Petra slowly stepped up to me. Her feet, bare, dragged in the water. She reached down and took my hand, and brought it up to our chests. Refracted light speckled everything. She smiled, so softly, and tilted her head to the side.

"No, Wayfarer," she said. "There isn't a future for us."

My face twisted. I felt tears come to my eyes and I slowly bent my head away.

"It's okay," she said.

"I need you," I said. "S-seriously. Right now I need you, so badly."

"I know," she said. "That's why I'm happy."

My voice and breath broke and I clenched my hands futilely. I broke down. Petra watched me with that same soft and sad

smile. Wasn't that so messed up? The fact that in the end she really was, she really was—

She really *got* me, didn't she? Even if she was complex, contradictory, dependent but with the ability to take action… she saw that within me earlier than I saw it in her.

She stroked a hand along my chin.

"A few days ago you," I stopped. "You asked me what my real name was."

"Don't," she said. "It won't change anything."

I said it. I said my real name. And then I said, with my voice crumpling, that's what it is. Okay? You don't have to wonder. You don't have to change anything. You can keep, keep seeking your suicide by me, and I'll—

I'll love you, okay? Even if this will hurt me so badly. They say that no one really wants to die, that at the precipice of suicide they all regret it, but maybe that's only because those people who regretted it were the only ones who lived to tell the tale. You don't seem to regret this.

You managed to make me care about you so much. I love you. That's all there is to it.

That's all that I said to her.

She turned to look at the sun as it crossed below the horizon. Navy blue spread out across the world, a whorl of colors concentrating in pink and orange to the direction she watched, behind us was black.

"The stars are so pretty tonight," she said, finally. But there weren't any stars.

Rudolf scrabbled at the magic plug. He had managed to turn it the other way around. It pointed toward Falida. But there was an issue. It was all hopeless, all meaningless, all totally doomed. There was nothing that could be done! It was abjectly incomprehensible and the key to their situation that would allow their slaughter to be stopped, cannonball and gunpowder *where was a cannonball and where was the gunpowder?* There was none! The magic plug was built off a cannon repurposed and could be used as one but they had no cannonballs and no gunpowder!

Rudolf looked about, again and again, and his grimace increased in intensity with each reeling motion. Where? Where? Where?

Where.

His hands trembled, and faltered. Slowly, his body lost animation. He slumped. His forehead knocked against the stained, rough metal surface of the magic plug. It was over. He pulled a heavy inhalation in and made a frustrated noi—

"Don't be sad, Rudolf," said Eric, who had crawled up to the plug. His eyes crinkled. "We'll win. I know what you need."

"Eric..."

"You were one of the men who wanted to save me, weren't you...?"

"Yeah," said Rudolf. He stared into Eric's eyes.

"Thank you for that. Rudolf, go to Hell and save my family. The frendlian farms. The Eights. Please. I'm pleading with you. This is my debt repaid, so I'm pleading with you."

"Eric...?"

"In my hair, there's a sprout. It won't be very big, because I escaped from the farm. I need you to pull the sprout to generate the artifact. My arms are broken. I can't."

"Eric, what are you...?"

"I'm trying to be a true hero," said Eric. "So come on. It's what we need."

Rudolf reached toward Eric's hair, parted the strand, and found inside a green sprout. He closed his eyes and pulled. The sprout disconnected.

He instantly opened his eyes. Lying on the ground was a cannonball and pile of gunpowder.

"Rudolf!"

The magic plug, instrument of connection, fired.

The enemy writhing stopped suddenly. Everyone was frozen. The cannonball impacted her. Blood and gore exploded outward as she totally shattered, completely, splitting cracks melting along every single edge. It was over. It was over. And our connection had shattered.

Tiny gems fell gleaming from the sky. Petra smiled at me. I smiled at Petra. There was one last thing to do. The enemy still existed. The one who needed to be liberated...

I raised my hand and held Petra's neck. We stood there together.

I pushed her. She fell backwards into all the falling gleaming gems.

She smiled at me. *Thank you.*

In slow motion my hand raised up, just slightly, acted as a sight, I mimicked Rudolf:

"**Sleep peacefully, Petra.**"

Wind passed through the corridor. I had focused it all into one point, just as Rudolf had told me. A chip of flesh and bone flew out. A chunk of Petra was atomized. She fell.

We stood in the pool of blood and gore. My magic was expended again.

Petra's body laid inert. A tiny speck of blood traced down her forehead. She stared into nothingness beyond.

Rudolf gazed sadly at me. Where was Eric?

Falida on my arm pulsed blood-red.

"It's over," I said aloud. I felt nothing. Was this Unbreakable? I hoped it was. I wanted to want to break down crying right now. I wanted to want to die. Unbreakable took hold.

021 / parasol

We left Petra in the cave. Me and Rudolf were the only survivors. We wheeled the magic plug through the shredded vines lying dead on the floor and the thorns underfoot. The light of the moon shone down on us filtered through branches and leaves ahead. It was bright.

"It's over," I said aloud. We walked through empty forest. Rudolf trailed behind me.

So many dead. But the forest was peaceful, solitary. There were no animals, no people, there was nothing besides the slow footsteps of me and Rudolf.

"It is," said Rudolf finally.

"Do you regret any of it?" I said.

"Nah," said Rudolf.

"I regret so so much," I said.

"It's what's happened," said Rudolf. "No point regrettin',"

"Yeah," I said.

"Don't be pathetic," said Rudolf.

"..."

"Hah."

"I'm sorry you have such a low opinion of me."

We stopped. Ahead of us was a ruined wall. Short. We unsteadily climbed over and past it. Pebbles slipped down and fell.

"... Sorry," said Rudolf.

"Sorry?"

"I naturally sort of..."

"Antagonize?"

"I'd prefer not to phrase it like that... but, er..."

I nodded. I understood. We were all the same in the end. Eric, Rudolf, and I. Petra was the exception. But she was dead.

"Yeah," I said. "It's fine."

"..."

"I don't know what to think about it all," I said. "They're all dead, aren't they? Besides Wienlie. We'll come up on their corpses in a moment. This incursion..."

"Was an absolute failure," said Rudolf. "That's right. Because of Petra and Falida, it was."

"Yeah," I said, slightly quieter. "The reinforcements will arrive. As long as we survive it'll be alright. In the grand scheme of things it's just an outpost, right? Not even important. In the grand scheme of us no one was important. Even Wienlie, right? All those legends everyone talked about... that was just his cohort, in the end, right? He was a small fry like everyone else. He struggled to beat the demons just like me. Just like you."

"... Yep," said Rudolf.

"Well," I said. "There's one thing left to do. Let's go to the outpost, and hope the monsters around it have been cleared, and try to use the magic plug. Maybe it won't have been such a failure that way. How many of us died...? It doesn't matter. We'll reconnect, whatever it takes, as long as it's physically possible."

"Never stop moving," intoned Rudolf.

"Yeah," I said.

"..."

"..."

"... How do you feel about Petra?"

"I feel better than I should," I said, and smiled. I hoped that my smile was sad. "I feel like I can persist."

"It's not so hard to recover from adversity," said Rudolf. "Even if someone you respected, or liked, is dead. I get it's awful... but it's the right response to persist."

"Thank you," I said.

We came into another wide clearing. The stench of death and stained gore assailed us. In sheets against the grass lit gray by moon's light there was blood. Light that should've been white was red. It was gleaming and crystalline like gems. I was reminded of Falida.

Corpses of beasts and monsters lay lacerated and crushed into pulp all across the clearing. A stand was held here. Edwardius Regius II lay there too. His gut was burst open and his entrails were scattered across the ground. I pulled a breath in and

looked away. I felt nothing, not like the awful feeling I felt when I saw Tio's corpse the first time.

We moved on. Past the clearing there was a slashed path through the woods. Blood gleamed on the edges of leaves and cut branches. It was probably Falida leading the pack, cut-cut-cutting her way through.

We stepped through the Falida tunnel. It led onward into a wide stretch of forest that had been mulched. The unidentifiable muscular legs of a person, a man. More monster corpses. Long beaks and arched claws and furry coats and everything. It felt like the entirety of Sunder's forces in this backwater region of the outpost had manifested to oppose Wienlie's intrusion.

There was nothing for us here.

"The guns," I said, as we walked.

"What about them?" said Rudolf.

"Why didn't we have them before? Why doesn't everyone carry a gun, instead of..."

It had never been something we had to talk about in the server. People tended not to play ranged weapons because of the aesthetic of the server, and because most people automatically fell into more generic roles in the story, as Labyrinth Climbers was a power fantasy.

"Eh... they aren't strong at all," said Rudolf. "Most artifacts are melee weapons. Guns don't work against a skilled fighter, either, in the first place... bullets can't scale with your strength. And the bullets aren't strong by themselves, not with the controls the governments place on their production."

"Controls?"

"Yep. The Gun Pact. To prevent the concept of guns from disseminating among the populace, so that Hell doesn't have access to guns—guns which *would* be empowered. Even if a well-made, powerful gun can't kill a skilled fighter, it can kill a normal person. So then demons would get guns that could kill demons. Combine that with how guns are a more recent invention, so Clockwork knows what to do this time around. And they're *also* more complex than a sword, which makes them easier to control dissemination of around the populace. Really, it's that if the Gun Demon was strong, it'd be a lot scarier than the Blade Demon—which is already one of the strongest in Hell."

"Yeah," I said.

"Which is why guns are intentionally made either as weak as possible—for common people—or more weak than necessary—for last-ditch military operations."

"But you have cannons," I said.

"'t's an earlier invention," he replied. "And Clockwork tried for a very long time to purge cannons from the libraries and cultural consciousness, and succeeded to some degree. But cannons themselves have different targets and abilities, conceptually. They need different things to be used in the context of said different things, so to speak. A gun is, eh... 'blam.'"

We continued. The corpses piled up around us. Underfoot was pulped red matter and bone. We squished through diced, shredded meat. Turgid it sank into the dirt and grass.

It seemed Wienlie's group had made it through the forest. All the way through the forest, right up... to the entrance ... of the outpost. It was barred by portcullis.

I stared right at the portcullis. It was stained with fresh blood. I dared not turn my head, because I knew that if I let the corpses out of my peripheral vision and into full sight, I would feel myself slide back into Unbreakable again. Or maybe I was already in Unbreakable? I didn't want to test it.

"They're all dead, aren't they?" I said.

"..."

"Please don't make me look," I said.

"Alright. They're all dead... no, Linie is alive. Injured but alive."

"We'll set the magic plug up and then come out and grab her," I said. "I can open this portcullis."

I walked up to the portcullis and extended my crystal arm. *Through the bars it extended outward. Falida, search for... um, whatever rolls a portcullis up. It should be a winch and pulley, which you can wind up to pull it along its grooves.*

Moments passed. Falida on my arm grew thinner and thinner.

I am unable to find the winch system, said Falida.

Look harder, I said.

More moments passed. Suddenly there was a groaning sound. The portcullis began to raise. Falida melded around each of the bars passing through her. It locked into place—Falida had secured the winch.

She retracted. "Nice," I said.

Rudolf nodded appreciatively. We both entered the outpost.

"So, Eric," I said.

"What about him?"

The outpost was a long keep extending upward into the sky. There was this main wall around it—that we had successfully penetrated—and then the building itself had another door we'd have to open, that I assumed was closed-up as well.

For now everything was dead silent. I had Falida guide me to the winch, where I closed the portcullis up so none of Sunder's monsters could get in. I noticed owls watching me, but that was okay. We couldn't completely cut off his flow of information.

"He hated me a lot," I said.

"The two of you are similar," said Rudolf. "Both of you have a tendency towards hatred fueled by ego..."

"Yeah," I said. "What was he? What happened at the end there?"

"I hadn't put it together till then, but," Rudolf paused. "Eric was a sort of human called a frendlian. They're rare, and the sort of thing that has caused a lot of wars and moral crises in the past. They have the ability to become artifacts when the sprout in their hair is pulled."

"And it kills them..."

But that had no response.

We went inward. I had Falida pick the lock of the door. It swung wide open. Death-smell again. Rotting corpses littered the

ground floor of the keep. On the tables, where I assumed they had their meals, in the corners, everywhere...

"What was the story of what happened here, Rudolf...? Wienlie had hinted at it, but didn't want to say anything."

"... There was a woman, a captain of the outpost. As far as we understand it she made a sacrifice with Sunder and became an Acolyte. In her dread knight form she killed them all and disconnected this outpost from the magic web. We don't think she's still here, as she isn't useful to Sunder loitering in an outpost like this."

"So really there were *three* Acolytes at the beginning. The rider, this woman..."

"And Falida."

"And Falida, yeah."

I glanced down at the crystal on my arm.

We moved forward past the corpses. We came to a stairwell by which we ascended upward. It spiraled and spiraled and spiraled until floor two.

Just as we moved up the stairwell someone else came down the one opposite us in the room.

A young woman with a pleasant face wearing a long leather jacket. At her sides were two sheathed blades. She tilted her head and smiled.

"Hey there," she said. Her tone was casual. "I'm Laetitia. You?"

"Wayfarer," I said. "Rudolf," said Rudolf just behind me. We stuck to the back wall of the room.

The air grew still. She watched us.

"Reconnection brigade," she said.

"Yes," Rudolf replied.

"Let me pass," she said.

"Make a glorious sacrifice you won't kill us," I said.

"Vow [Glorious Sacrifice]: FOR THE NEXT 40 MINUTES I WILL NOT KILL YOU. I WILL NOT ATTEMPT TO DOUBLE BACK AND KILL YOU AFTER THE NEXT 40 MINUTES. AS LONG AS NEITHER OF US COME INTO NECESSARY DIRECT CONFLICT FOR THE REST OF TIME INSTIGATED BY A THIRD PARTY NEITHER PARTY WILL PLAN OR MAKE AN ATTEMPT ON THE LIFE OF THE OTHER PARTY."

"I agree to this vow," I said.

"And you?" she looked at Rudolf.

"... I agree to this vow," said Rudolf.

"Thanks," she said. "I wouldn't have killed someone on my side *just like that* anyway, you know~"

She brushed past me, finger-gunned at Falida on my arm. "Seriously, though, thanks! Didn't want to get into a fight. Say, you know Sartaca or Varim?"

"... They're dead," I said.

"That's a shame," she said. "Seriously... well, I guess nothing's easy! Thanks for the chat. Ciao~"

She walked down the stairwell and disappeared.

"Was that..."

"That was the Sundered Acolyte," said Rudolf. "We are very lucky."

"Yeah," I said. We had barely managed to beat the rider, which was *far* weaker than Falida—the only reason we beat her was because Petra was holding her so far back, and looking for death herself.

We moved upward. Everyone had been slaughtered in the dining hall. The rest of the outpost was free of corpses or bloodshed—just covered in mildew and mold. Why was the Acolyte here? What was she doing?

"Living quarters are up from here," said Rudolf. "Above those there's the top of the tower. Where we might connect the magic plug."

I nodded. We ascended past the living quarters, sterile and uncomfortable bunk beds lined, to the top. There was a large dais, and in the center was an area for insertion. The magic would shoot into the plug and be refracted in powerful ways, connecting it to the global magic network, as I understood it.

We set the plug on the ground, with its wheels. It was charred and warped.

"Ready?"

Rudolf nodded. We lifted it—and slammed it down into the socket. It settled.

Nothing happened.

We both looked at it. Then I looked at Rudolf, and he looked at me.

"Damn," said Rudolf.

"Yeah," I said. I laughed a little bit. "Came all this way."

"Yeah," said Rudolf.

We stepped back. My head fell and I took a breath in. "Yeah! Yeah, that's, that's how it is, I guess! That's life! All this way, and..."

"That's life," said Rudolf. "Sometimes that's just how it is."

"Wow," I said. Wow! We had totally failed. Probably because of the fact the plug had been used as a cannon. It was over. It was totally over.

The stars were visible through the windows outside. The stars were finally visible, and so was the moon. What was it? It seemed like it was nearly sunrise. A new day was beginning. I left the magic plug, totally useless, the fight and war was over and we had totally lost, and walked to the edge of the keep's top. I breathed in the air.

Reconnecting is hard, isn't it? I looked at the stars. I imagined what it would've been like if everyone had survived to look at them too. Maybe Tio would have had her whole regal outlook shaken, and could participate, and Edwardius would maybe be getting at her, antagonizing her, and Wienlie would have his noble smile, and Sartaca and Varim would still exist, we'd figure out what was happening with Laetitia. And Eric would be here and he and I would be finally making a connection with each other. And Petra would be here, and she'd be leaning on my

shoulder, and we'd stare at the moon together. But now it was just me and Rudolf.

I smiled up at the moon. I felt so sad, and a tear ran down my cheek. But it really, really was over. Even though I felt sad, I was a little bit grateful that at least me and Rudolf had survived.

The stars were small. They were so small. The moon looked down on us. Maybe Wienlie was watching. Maybe Sunder's owls could fly so high up here. But it didn't matter who watched me. I was okay with it all.

A black shape landed beside me.

A woman. She wore a massive backpack with a large propeller rotor on it, which with her hood she threw off. Gears clicked inside of the hollow cavities of her cheeks. She looked around, scanning Rudolf and I with bright, glowing pinpricks of light in her eyes. Robotically she turned and turned again.

"ITO to BASE CONTROL. SCAN of UPPER KEEP complete. I have IDENTIFIED all of the SURVIVORS of this EXPEDITION. Total DEAD: TIO-SCHITONA-TE-TELEMARSUNA. GASTON DEHARBINGER. SARTACA THE WHALER. EDWARDIUS REGIUS II. SUNNY PRIVATE. VARIM GINSOLKAR. PETRA OF FALIDA. Totals SEVEN. Survivors INCLUDE: ERIC EIGHT. RUDOLF FIU MONETIN. WIENLIE OTIO-FUGET. LINIE SEONOSANGUA SUITO-MESSER. And an UNKNOWN ELEMENT, contracted to the ACOLYTE of SUNDER, FALIDA, BLOODY-HANDED BENEDICT ARNOLD. Totals FIVE. BASE CONTROL, permission to ENGAGE the ACOLYTE?"

Her pinprick eyes fixed on me. A signal came in. Muddy and distorted man's voice mumbled through mixed speakers.

"APPRECIATED."

The cloak fully dropped. She stretched out both hands. In them appeared two blades made of cutting light.

"KNIGHT OF SUNDER! I am ITO the GREAT, JÄGER. PREPARE, KNIGHT! Prepare to DIE."

Red Thread Wave / *end*

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author's note

hey, thank you for reading the first part of my story! i would love to hear anything you think below as a comment. if this story made you feel anything, please tell me! i would love fanart so even if you're embarrassed at all if it was good enough to warrant that please do show me anything you make! thank you for reading!