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# **Immor:Tale**

A.d.e.

## Prologue

Today I decided to do it.

To end everything.

Clinging to the railing on a office building I carefully looked down, trying to not lose the last bit of determination that had brought me this far. I always had been a coward and even now, with my whole resolve mustered, fear was dominating my thoughts.

*Looking down had been a mistake!*

I screamed and jerked back, almost losing my footing while doing so.

Nervously I looked back at the door I had come through. I was still alone up here, no one had noticed me yet. To get here I trespassed and even broke down a metal door with my body, leaving my shoulder still aching in pain.

The cold picked up and blew snow past my face, making me shiver even more than before. One might ask why I was outside in the middle of winter, wearing nothing but some old sweat pants and shirt despite the weather.

That was something I had burdened myself with, a fate that was writing itself since the moment I stopped caring about my life and those around me, trying to escape the things I had done and the people I had disappointed and that had disappointed me, leaving me paralyzed to act on my own.

Really, it was just my own decisions in life, or rather the lack thereof, that had driven me to this point. It was painful to put it like this, but I had known the past few years how it would end. Still I never managed to change something nor seek help from someone. Not that there really had been a person left to ask for help in the first place.

With ungracious moves I swung my legs over the railing and nearly slipped because of my sweaty hands and the shoulder screaming in pain, almost falling down.

The reason I was up here was to do exactly *that*, but I did not want it like *this*. I had to gather my courage before that!

*Really though, I actually did not want to jump at all. I love being alive. Just... that there is not much for me to continue to live for. I am worthless. I have nothing left.*

My feet were dangling over the streets, my butt planted on the railing, Slowly I lifted my hands, moving them before my face, going through my thoughts one more time. That was until the wind started blowing again, hitting my back and almost sending me down. I flailed my hands around, just barely holding my balance.

*Well, no, I did not forget anything. I never talked with my parents after they threw me out, my girlfriend left me already five years ago and I did not have any friends in the first place. Or made new ones after shutting myself in the past years.*

Okay, nothing left then. Now I could just jump.

Well, *could*.

Just one push.

I only had to let go.

Not much, just one move.

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In an ordinary office building in the middle of the city chaos was breaking out. The servers were running on maximum capacity for days now, unimaginable amounts of data was recorded and the hard drives were almost completely filled despite being nonstop expanded by overworked technicians.

But now those servers suddenly stopped the constant summing they gave of in the past days, the loud noise they created that had dominated the room for days now gone. The chief worker had deleted most of the files that would have proved valuable research data, just like the head of the department had ordered him to.

He was breathing hard, the air in the room hot and stagnant. The air conditioner had been running on full power, but it still had not been enough in the end.

Some of the machines had already overheated and had to be replaced, making it difficult for them to let the operation continue flawlessly.

He looked at the screen, a big warning sign was blinking at him.

*STOP PROJECT A.D.E.?*

*ALL PROGRESS WILL BE LOST.*

*THIS CAN NOT BE UNDONE.*

*ARE YOU SURE?*

*Y/N*

The man did not hesitate to enter the command and finally shut it down for good, relief washing over him. The past few days he had not gotten any sleep, just like the rest of the team. Finally, the torture was over.

He put the phone back to his ears. "It's done. I did what you wanted me to."

"Good. My son also seems fine now. Let me handle the higher ups."

The voice on the other side sounded just as relieved as him when he ended the call.

With a sigh the chief worker put his head on the keyboard, closing his eyes, trying to resist the urge to sleep that hit him.

But, unseen to him, just as he had hit enter something had emerged between the rows of computers behind him. Well, to be fair, that *something* could not be seen by anyone in the room, and a few workers even stepped *through* it, not noticing anything abnormal.

This *thing* that emerged looked like a human, but he was formless and had neither gender nor facial features, yet it seemed human in form.

And he had an *awareness*. He could *observe* everything around him, *feel* what those people around him were feeling, *hear* what they were thinking and even see what they were seeing.

"I am a god." he observed. He had no clue as to why he thought this, or what even brought this line of thinking in the first place, it was just something he *knew*. *Remembered. Observed from their view.*

Curiously the self claimed god stepped to the chief worker working on the console and looked at the screen,

"Ade? Is this my name?" He thought out loud, but his voice could not be heard by those around him. Meanwhile the chief worker closed the program that had been running and started rummaging through some of those data folders that were created while running the A.D.E. program. At one folder he stopped, wondering what it meant.

It was labeled "souls" and took quite some space, yet it had only appeared after the program had stopped, the man was sure of that. Curiously he opened it, only to find some corrupted files.

Ade, who was still behind the chief worker, continued to think about his situation. "I do not know my name, I do not know why I am suddenly here. I am a god, that I am sure of, but how did I come here? It somehow feels like something erased my memory."

And there was something else. A nagging feeling deep inside of him, a voice- no, a *soul* screaming for life, begging to become part of the world again. It was desperate and Ade somehow *felt* that it was important to him, but he ignored it for now.

With a step he turned around and walked out of the building, not noticed by anyone. And when he hit a wall he just passed right through it, continuing walking on nothing but air on the outside, overcome by the joy of freedom. A freedom to do and experience anything he liked, the freedom of a *god*.

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I looked down again, not having learned from the first time. Fear took its hold of me

once more, my legs starting to shake again. Forcing my head up I now gazed on the grey sky above me.

*Maybe I should pray?*

I never had been interested in religion, it was just something I never really cared about before in my life. But, well, if there is someone listening...

“Please let me reincarnate into a world of magic and fantasy.”

It was a pathetic prayer, something born from envy. But maybe there was someone listening. And if someone was listening, he might let me become a hero or one of those overpowered characters that get dozens of heroines fall for them. *Taking on life in easy mode was something I always had dreamed of, something I always had envied the other people around me for. Living seemed easy for them.*

I took another deep breath and looked down again, resolving my will to finally- “I cant jump! It’s too scary!” I screamed, trying to climb back over the fence. Suddenly my hand slipped from the railing, causing the world to turn upside down.

I started screaming out of panic, trying to grab the edge again. At first I only grabbed air, but just when I was about to lose hope my hand reached something. Holding on to it with all my strength I pulled myself up, barely avoiding falling to my death. *Wasn’t that the sole reason I had come here for in the first place?*

With my last strength I pulled myself up from the lower edge, climbing back to the fence. Only after my feet were on solid ground again I finally relaxed a bit, closing my eyes for a moment. When I had caught my breath I opened them again and looked back at the entrance I had come from-

*looking directly into a featureless and pale white face in front of my face, seeming like it was there somehow, but also kind of not at the same time.*

“I heard your wish.” The face said, the voice coming from where there was *supposed* to be a mouth. “Wh-What?” I stuttered, but before I could even comprehend what was happening he lifted his hand, as pale as the rest of his body, and lunged it right between my eyes.

Everything went black while a kind of pain I never felt before shot through my mind, drowning everything else. It was a feeling like I was being ripped from the inside. Suddenly it stopped. And with it my awareness.

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The man was dead before his body even started falling backwards from the building. Ade had heard his earnest wish while passing by and wanted to grant it, sensing a nearing possible death of this human. He took his soul and put it to the other one that was screaming inside of him. There was only one *small* problem Ade had: he did not know of any other *worlds* or of “*fantasy*” and “*magic*”. It seems he would

have to hold on to those souls for quite a while.

With a shrug of his shoulders Ade continued to walk through the air, ignoring the screams and shouts on the street below him.

## 1: Arrival

That *thing* that had once been Ade was now sitting on a rooftop in a city, looking down on the streets. His appearance had not changed, but his whole being seemed *different*. There was nothing more left of him that could be called human in the way he behaved and talked, not that there really had been much of that to begin with.

“Error.” he said without ever bothering to care what that error even was or why it appeared. He only sat there on his place, not moving, only observing the world around him, occupying this space for a century now.

Of the two souls he had with him one was already gone. It had been the one that was shouting to live, trying to escape him all the time. The only thing left was the calm soul of the man from the rooftop. He remembered the wish from the human, but even after he understood the wish the man had uttered, he never really had the opportunity to fulfill his wish. Not in a way that would not destroy the promises he had made before he woke up. Those *promises* were engraved in his very existence, limiting what he was able to do to humans.

“Error.” Ade blurted out once again. Something caught the interest of him, a commotion on a street not far from the spot he was sitting on.

“It. Is. Time.” He said, standing up slowly. “I. Promised.” he continued, followed by another error. His form on this world was too unstable, even impacting his capability to appear and talk to others the way he used to.

With one step after another Ade approached the truck driving below him, preparing the remaining soul.

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A truck with a fabric plane and an open backside, only a metal plate giving cover for the people inside, was driving recklessly on the dark and empty street with its headlights turned off. The sun just had started climbing the horizon and was only spending enough light to barely illuminate the outlines of the surroundings. A dozen black cars without roofs, driven by men in black suits, were chasing the truck. The men in the backseats were standing with crossbows in their hands and fired a barrage of bolts at the truck.

“Shit!” screamed one of the two people in the back of the truck. “They caught us too fast, that was not planned!”

The person shouting was a young man with blonde hair and green eyes adorning his beautiful, slim face, hiding himself behind the metal cover. A bolt penetrated the metal next to his face, its tip standing out as if to spot him. “Not planned at all!” He screamed, his face twisting in anger.

He took a one handed crossbow from his holster and loaded it, shooting at the cars behind him.

“This was not part of the contract!” the person next to him said, a young boy that seemed to just have gotten into puberty with deep blue eyes and black hair reaching to his neck. He was pale and petite, his smooth face seemed girlish, but in a different way from the blond guy.

“Forget the contract! If we cannot shake them, there will be no one to pay you! And if we actually do get out of this, you can even have something out of those big fat bags we have here for your trouble!” the blond man shouted back, pointing at the boxes and bags that were farther behind, occupying most of the space behind them, only leaving a small space to the door leading to the driver cabin.

The black haired boy did only reply with an angry growl, taking out his own one handed crossbow and started to load it. “They are sure to soon bring out the bigger guns, so be careful.” he warned the blond boy and held his crossbow over the metal cover, shooting at their pursuers without even taking aim.

“Honestly, I should just kill both of you and take some of the spoils with me. That would be far more easy than that target you have offered...” he muttered, staring at the cargo.

The blond boy laughed. “Ha! But money is not exactly anything you have to worry about, isn’t it? And I know how much you want to get your target, Shima. So shut up and help!” he shouted and crawled a bit to the back, starting to empty a big bag on the floor. “Give me cover, I will assemble this thing so we might have a chance at escaping.” The blond boy said, his smile not faltering.

The black boy mustered the parts and smirked. He liked the way the blond boy thought. This job was turning out to be quite some fun.

“They are doing something weird back there!” a woman screamed from the driving cabin, panic in her voice.

The black haired boy loaded his crossbow again and peaked over the metal cover, squinting his eyes, trying to recognize what their enemies were doing.

Their pursuers had assembled the *big gun* he had warned the blond man of before and were already aiming at them. Or rather, aiming at *him*.

With a loud swoosh the heavy bolt flew to the cover made out of metal, penetrating it with ease and continuing to fly straight through the chest of the black haired

boy, leaving a small hole in the plane covering the trunk of the truck before disappearing into the darkness.

Without making a sound the boy fell backwards, blood flowing out from the hole in his chest.

“Oh shit oh shit oh shit! They killed our man!” the blond boy shouted, throwing the parts he was assembling to the side and reaching for a small pouch next to him.

“I will try to use a stone on him, I can’t do this on my own!” he shouted at the driver cabin. “Understood. I will try to make it difficult for them to hit us, but be careful!” came promptly the answer.

The blond man reached the boy, holding said stone to his chest, even though he had already stopped breathing and most likely was dead.

“Time to test if magic actually exists...” the blond boy muttered.

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In my dream I was still standing on that roof, just having chickened out of jumping when someone appeared before me, followed by endless darkness. But that dream ended as suddenly as it started, feeling no longer than just a few seconds.

*Did I die? Did I fall down in the end anyway?*

I was not feeling anything beside a dull head ache and a throbbing pain in my chest. *Or did I just lose consciousness from fear? If someone found me like this they surely would laugh at such an pathetic sight.*

My line of thinking was broken by my senses returning to me. A voice above me was shouting, followed by sounds of something rushing by in a high velocity and metal hitting metal. Slowly I opened my eyes. Everything farther than my nose was blurred and seemed like it was out of focus, making it hard to understand what was happening around me. I could see a blond guy with a pretty face looking at me. He was scowling and pressed something on my chest with force, making it feel like my ribs would break if he continued like this.

The boy continued shouting at me, but I could not understand anything. But something changed inside my head, slowly the gibberish turned into something familiar. With each word he spoke my understanding became better and better until I could understand him like I had always known this language.

“Stop lying here like a dead fish and stand up already!” he screamed, taking my hand and pressing it on the thing he was holding to my chest.

Without thinking I continued to press the thing to my chest when he took his hand away, confused by the situation I found myself in.

“Where are we? Am I dreaming?” I blurted out, unsure what was going on around me, my words escaping my lips in the same language he was using.



“Are you kidding me? Or did you hit your head?” He asked, still scowling at me, but then he growled holding his head after I only gave him a confused look. “Well, you have hit your head. What a pain.”

He grabbed a crossbow to his feet and threw it at me. “There are people following us because the plan-” he started to explain as something heavy swooshed over his head and penetrated a wooden box I tried to see what just had almost hit him, but my vision was too blurry to recognize it.

*Did my eyes go worse? Did I spend too much time playing video games?*

“Well, the plan failed at the last part and now we are followed by those government lackeys. Cover me until I finish putting this baby together. And this time, *don't* get hit. We only have two more stones and they are the last known of its kind.”

I gawked at him, but he was now fully concentrating on whatever was to his feet. Unsure what to do I peeked over the metal cover, that seemed to have quite a few holes.

What I saw was... well, I cannot say anything specific, since my vision was blurred. But it seemed like multiple black things were following and shooting something at us.

Just as the man had told me I lifted the crossbow, aiming at the blobs following us. But just as I wanted to pull the trigger, I realized what I even was doing here.

*I was just told to shoot at the persons following us. With a deadly weapon!*

I ducked behind the cover again, panicking.

*Did I almost kill someone just because someone told me to?*

I let the crossbow slip out of my hand, which activated the trigger, its bolt burrowing itself into a metal wall to my right. I starred at the bolt, feeling how the blood drained from my face. *If that would have hit someone...*

“What are you doing?” the blond boy shouted at me, not hiding the anger in his face. I shook my head in panic. “I cant kill people! I am sorry, but I just cant!” I screamed, my voice sounding higher than I was used to.

Before he could react both of us were pressed to the left. “Sorry!” a female voice from somewhere shouted, followed by something heavy penetrating the metal next to me and stop somewhere next to those boxes.

The boy looked at me dumbfounded, ignoring the parts rolling around his feet. Only after a few awkward seconds he finally asked “Are you for real now?”

“I have never killed someone before, and I have no intention to do so even now!” I declared, crossing the arms before my chest. He continued staring at me like I was some kind of alien, even ignoring the bolts that flew over our heads.

After a few seconds he shook his head and continued assembling the parts before him. “Well, whatever. This is more important now...” he muttered silently, sounding like he had given up on something.

Unsure what to do, now that the boy had abandoned every hope in me, I started looking at my body. The round belly I was used to see was now flat, only my chest sticking out a little bit.

*This is not my own body!*

The big fingers I had before were now slim and soft to the touch, even my nails looked better now.

*What is up with this situation? What happened? Whose body is this?*

“Hold on! We are entering the old city now!” a woman screamed from the front of the vehicle I was in, followed by continued shaking. That caused me to triple forward, almost planting my face on the ground. Black hair, longer than I was used to, was now visible in my field of vision. I always wore it short, a habit I had after my parents always forced me to keep them this way.

“I just finished assembling our new escape plan. If you really do not want to kill people...” he said, letting out something between a laugh and a snort, “then you can at least spin the lower wheel.”

He put the big cylinder before the metal cover so the wheel was next to me. “When I say start, you start spinning. Do *not* stop until I say so!” he ordered me. I hesitatingly nodded and did as he asked, intimidated by his cruel smile.

He got in cover behind the cylinder and aimed at the cars behind us. “Start!” he shouted, and I started spinning as I was told. The cylinder began also spinning noisily, a sound like a string being loosened and tightened again and again coming from it with accompanied by a swoosh.

“What... is this?” I asked, continuing spinning the wheel. Behind the metal cover I could hear shouts of pain and agony mixed with anger.

“That is my rotary crossbow gun. No manual reloading, only an endless rain of bolts on the enemy!” the blond boy shouted, his face twisting into a lunatic grin as he delivered death to the men behind us. The angry screams were fading, leaving only the screams for help and the death screams, followed by a laugh from the boy next to me, who did not even care about the bolts flying past his face.

“Stop!” I shouted at him after realizing what that wheel was for and letting go of it. “You are killing them!” I screamed, standing up and staring at the boy. The gun he had pointed at the enemy now could not fire anymore without me, making it useless for now. I had only spun it for a few seconds, but the screams I heard were more than enough.

The smile from his face vanished, turning into a grimace full of hate directed at me, making me take a step back. “You idiot!”

Before I could even react his fist smashed into my face, throwing me against the wall. While flying backwards I saw something fly by next to my nose and burrow itself in a wooden box farther behind.

Groaning from pain I pressed my hands on my nose, glaring at the boy “Those men deserved it! And you knew exactly what you were getting in when you joined us! So do not try to play the hero here!” His voice was dripping with anger. But the next part he said was with a low voice. “*Especially you* at that.”

*I should not play the hero? I know that well enough already!*

“I don’t know what you mean! I have no memory of ever agreeing to kill someone!”

“Did you hit your head?” He shouted, only remembering how he had punched my head moments ago, slapping his temple.

With a practiced motion he drew his crossbow and pointed it at me. “You are here to help us, so it says in the contract. And the contract also includes the death of quite some people, so you better remember that now, kid. We are not here for a fun trip!” he shouted, his voice very exasperated, another bolt flying past him.

“I never agreed to anything! I just woke up here!” I shouted back, ignoring the weapon he was pointing at me. “And then some weirdo just demands from me to shoot at people and possibly kill them! You say we have a contract? So what, I did not sign up for *any* of this crap!” I continued, ignoring the fact that he was just pointing his weapon at me.

The boy clicked his tongue, stretching his arm with the gun outside and shooting it without looking, followed by a scream. “The last car chasing us is gone, so get us to the tunnels before they catch up again.” he said without emotions., turning his head to the direction the driver was at.

“Sure, honey!” a voice replied from the driving seat, seeming strangely happy.

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Shortly after the boy said we should drive into the tunnels we stopped in a side alley between really old looking medieval style houses.

A few muscular men appeared behind the truck the moment we parked. The blond boy gave them an order, letting them open something with a loud creaking sound before our truck and soon we continued driving downwards, leaving the medieval part back and entering a long and dark tunnel, driving downwards.

At those sights I once again wondered about what kind of place I was in now. The pursuers had shot at us with crossbows, just like we did. Yet the vehicle we were sitting in was motorized, making me question why there would be no guns.

*Is this just some play? But in that case the obnoxious guy would not have hit me like this. And those bolts flying at us seemed quite real.*

Without thinking I slid my hands into the pockets of my jacket, where my hand hit something hard. *Was that not the thing I had to continue to press on my chest when I*

*woke up? I must have put it in my pocket without thinking when he had handed me the crossbow.*

Curiously I pulled the object out and inspected it in the dim light from the naked light bulbs hanging from the ceiling of the tunnel. It was... just a pebble. A big pebble with weird lines carved into it.

“Those things are worth a lot, you know? There are only three of them left, well, two now, but those are state treasures.” The blond boy told me, he seemed to have noticed me mustering the stone.

*State treasures? Those?*

“What is so great about this pebble? Is it about those carvings? Is it a relict or something?”

He laughed. “A relict? Yes, kind of. I never really believed in magic, but since you are not dead anymore...” He mustered me. “...Those things really seem to work. Never would have thought that.”

*Did he just say magic?*

“Yes, I did.” he replied. *Oops, I said that out loud.*

“They say that those stones are the last relicts of those ancient healing stones they used in the past. And the very best, at that. So powerful it is rumored to bring people back from death. And you are the living proof of those claims being true now. Who would have guessed?”

“Death?” I asked him. “I do not remember dying or something.”

The blond boy continued to stare at me, his hand scratching his chin. “So you really do not remember anything?” He asked me after a long pause with sadness on his face. “You were one of the best. Such a shame.” he muttered.

Just as I wanted to ask what he meant with that, the light grew brighter and the scene that was visible from behind changed.

“We almost arrived at the train just in time, prepare for the next step!” a woman shouted again.

And true to her words a train appeared at our side, with the vehicle we were driving in slowly overtaking it until we were side to side with an open door of a cargo container. A few men in there were waving at us, holding out their hands.

“Take down the tarp from our truck and help them with connecting the plank! After that we carry the boxes and the bags over!” the blond boy ordered me, leaving no room for protest.

Just as he wanted I removed the plane, which sported quite a few holes from bolts penetrating it, and then we put a plank between the still moving train and the vehicle.

The men got quickly to work, carrying the boxes over to the train. But when I tried to pick one up, I could barely move it. “What the hell is in those boxes? They are too heavy!” I shouted.

“It is filled with pure gold to the brim, so it might be a bit heavy.” the blond boy said, picking up one of the bags and carrying it over without any problems.

*Did he just say pure gold?!*

“Did we rob a bank or something?” I joked with a grin on my face.

“So you remember now?” The boy asked with hope in his voice.

“Wait, really?” I shouted, falling on my butt, kicking over one of the heavy bags, which fell to my feet. The words on it, not a language I knew from my past, started just like the spoken language to make sense in my head, and after a second I understood what was written on it.

*“Krahenfels International Bank.”*

*Is this real? Is all of this not just some big nightmare? And if not, what would happen with me after I helped someone with escaping after robbing a bank?*

Something touched my shoulder, just as I was trying to understand how screwed I was. “Say, if you cannot help carry them, might you take over driving duty from me?” said the owner of the hand. It was the voice of the woman coming from the driving seat standing behind me now.

*Behind me.*

I looked around, seeing the walls *still moving past us.*

“Who is driving right now?” I asked the woman with brown hair and green eyes, ignoring the clearly erotic clothes she was wearing, which seemed to focus on presenting her bust.

“No one is, honey.” She said with a calm voice, smiling at me like everything was perfectly fine. “We have only two minutes left. Hurry up!” The blond boy shouted from the train, ignoring my face showing pure disbelief, just like the woman before me did.

“Well, I will get on the train now. Good luck with the truck then.” She said, blowing me a kiss and calmly walking over the plank, followed by the men with the last boxes.

*Wait... I can't drive! I never got a license! What the hell is happening here?*

To perplexed to even react I just continued staring at them. Together they crossed the plank connecting the moving train with the truck, leaving me behind.

“Sorry, Shima, but this is where we part.” the blond guy smiled at me and removed the plank between the vehicles. “The plan was from the start to get you captured, but well, if you do not remember that part... maybe you will later. If not...” He let out a sigh. “Good luck! Just don't tell them where we went or where we live. Not that you would remember that anyway.” *Shima...? Was that the name of this body?*

With his last word said he closed the door of the container and stone pillars started to appear between us, shattering the plank between us and separating me from the train.

“Wait... what?” I muttered, still unable to process this whole situation. And just when I tried to make any sense of it, I remembered that the vehicle I was standing on had no driver!

I screamed from shock and opened the door to the driver seat, only to be greeted with a turning wheel that was taped to a lever, stopping it from shaking. The gas pedal was being weighed down with a stone taped to the floor beneath the wheel. And to make matters worse, I could see the lights on the ceiling bending further down the tunnel, indicating that there was a curve coming.

“I am going to die...” I muttered, throwing myself into the seat and trying to rip the tape off. I was only successful with the tape at the steering wheel, but sitting on the driver seat now I could not reach the tape on the gas pedal, having no choice but to continue like this until I found the brake.

And to make matters even worse, I could not see anything clear past my nose at best and not make out any details of the blurry mess past a meter or so ahead, making me effectively blind. The only saving grace was that this was a tunnel, so as long as I could go straight nothing would happen. Well, if no train was coming from the other side on a colliding course, at least.

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Just half an hour ago I was standing on top of a building, just about to chicken out from jumping when a weird thing appeared and my memory stopped working for a moment. But since then my life had taken a drastic turn in a short time. Suddenly I woke up in a new body, helped to kill people and in that process I even had helped bank robbers to escape with their loot, making me a criminal. And to top that of, not only had they abandoned me, saying that me getting captured was part of the plan, they also forced me into a vehicle with the gas pedal tied down while I was almost blind.

*And, to make matters even more worse than they already are...*

“Which pedal is the brake?!” I screamed on top of my lungs, trying each of the remaining two to my feet. But the answer was: none of them. Instead the truck I was sitting in suddenly picked up speed, ignoring all my pleas for it to stop.

I steered around the next curve, a bright light greeting me at its end. Was it a train? If yes, I could say goodbye to this life.

I approached it with the truck still picking up speed, unable to do anything else. I tried each lever and button next to me, but it only activated some features for driver comfort, the air horn and the wipers, but the truck was still not getting any slower.

As I approached the light I started to scream for my life, closing my eyes and fearing the impact that was bound to happen.

A few seconds passed. Then another few. Slowly I opened my eyes, taking my surroundings in.

“Thank god, I am not longer in that tunnel!” I shouted, seeing the daylight and the blurry trees around me

As if to celebrate my survival so far, a loud honk came from before me. Or it was to warn me from ramming headfirst into the black wall approaching me with great speed.

Once again I screamed for my life and steered to the left without even thinking, breaking through some wood and bushes with the truck, shaking the whole vehicle. But that only barely slowed it down. Instead of stopping it picked up even more speed from driving downhill, shaking me thoroughly.

I forced my eyes open, trying to not crash into the trees that were appearing before me. That proved no easy task with my bad vision, the constant shaking and the speed I was going at.

After what felt like an eternity I reached the bottom of the hill, a flat ground in a forest. The forest part about that was still a problem, but somehow I managed for now. Desperately I once again tried every button I could find around me, but I had no luck. I glanced for a short moment at the cockpit around me, searching for something I could stop the truck with, but that proved to be a big mistake. The second I looked up again I was greeted by big roots growing out of the ground. Unable to avoid them the truck bounced up and tilted to the left, causing a crack in the window.

The poor vision I had was now completely gone, leaving me to drive blindly. And before I knew it something felt weird, somehow like gravity had been turned off. The next instant it was gone, being replaced by the feeling of falling down.

Did I just drive over a cliff?!

*And if yes, did I put on the seatbelt? Is it too late to check now?*

My question about the cliff was answered with a loud splashing sound and an abrupt stop, throwing my head against the steering wheel.

Accompanied by the sound of water rushing in through the doors and the truck’s horn loudly blaring, I could not even register the pain before I lost consciousness.

## **2: Hard Landing**

I groaned from pain, slowly opening my eyes. I was cold and my head hurt like it was split open. Slowly I lifted my head from the steering wheel, registering that it had no airbag, and looked around.

I was still sitting in the driver seat, but there was brown and smelly water up to my lower chest. It was cold and my limbs had gone limp, also i could feel something touching my leg for a second under water.

With another groan I tried to open the door next to me, but it did not move. After taking a look out of the window I understood why. The water level on the outside was even higher than it was on the inside. If it hadn't been for those windows, I would have drowned when I was unconscious. And considering the front window had cracks in it and was still holding up, I had been very lucky.

Forcing my weak legs on the ground I stood up, making my way to the back door leading to the cargo space I woke up in before. That door was opening without a problem, only letting a little bit of water inside the driver cabin. I forced my way further up the back of the truck, up to the metal ramp. The front of the vehicle was almost completely under water, air bubbles appearing around it while it slowly sunk deeper.

With a sigh I jumped back on land, sinking into the mud, water squirting up from the sides.

*Ugh, seems like I have to keep on moving to not get stuck in this swamp.*

I continued walking forwards, trying to escape the mud clinging to my feet that seemed like it wanted to swallow me just like the truck I had left behind.

By sheer force of will I kept on moving through the mud, ignoring the limpness of my legs caused by the cold and the headache. I also noticed that the trees around me did not have any leaves, leaving the possibility that something toxic was in the water or that it was winter. Given by the temperature and the thick clothes my new body was wearing I tended to the later.

After what felt like an eternity I finally reached dry land again. Exhausted I just fell down on the spot, not even caring about getting dirty or the mud getting stuck on my face. I felt tired and had no strength left.

*How did I get into such a crazy situation?*

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I just started to relax while being slumped forward, one ear on the ground, when a voice spoke to me.

“Oh, what are you doing here? Trying to stalk some game?”

I let out a shriek and turned to the source, seeing an old man standing there, broad shoulders, a stubble beard, gray hair combed to the side and brown eyes. “Oh, uh, nothing, sir.” I answered, unsure what to do. “I was just exhausted from, uh, a long walk.” I blurted out, not wanting to admit I just helped some people rob a bank.



“A long walk, you say? Where do you live, then? I do not know any huts out here that are even close enough for less than walking one and a half day, and the other only place would be with the Naga tribe in the cave west from here.”

*Oops. If I would not carefully considering my answers, this man could my downfall, causing me to be arrested and thrown into the jail.*

After much consideration on my part I tried to go along with what he assumed. Maybe I could bullshit my way out of this, just like I always did with my parents.

“Uh, yeah, I was with the *Magas*, sir.”

“You mean the Nagas?”

“Yes, yes, exactly. Did I not say that?” I waved it off, laughing awkwardly.

“Hm.” the man grunted, smiling at me. “Then you must be someone special. The Nagas here usually keep their distance from other humans, even if they are still celebrated in Krahenfels to this day.”

*Okay, well, that seemed like a big mistake. I have no ideas what those Nagas are or what he means with distance from humans, but I guess that also means he can't check it. Maybe I can actually roll with it?*

“But you still seem a bit lost. Do you perhaps need a helping hand from an old man?” He asked, his smile never leaving his face. He seemed suspiciously kind, but at this point, I had no idea where I was, where I could go, and how things around here seemed to work. Hell, I even had no idea if I had landed in a different world or just another country with weird laws.

*Though he did difference those Nagas from humans.*

I nodded, not having any other choice but to follow this stranger in a lonely forest into his hut without any souls near us.

*Sounds pretty scary if I think about it like that. Am I sure about this?*

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He led me through the forest for quite some time, talking about how bad the weather was this year, how the damn railroads coming from the main city always caused so much noise if the wind was blowing the wrong way and that he had to spend the last two months here for a job.

That all seemed normal for me, nothing you could not encounter from where I came from. That was until he complained that sometimes still a monster would show up. That is right, he did not say a beast, predator or wolves, no, he said *monster!* This *had* to be an actual fantasy world! I mean, the blond guy from before told me about magic, but I have never seen it, and believing *him* was something I could not bring myself to, but this was the first time something could prove it!

“Sir, can you tell me more about monsters?” I asked him, trying to hide the joy in my voice.

“Hm, did the Nagas never take you with them for hunting?” He said, glaring at me with his eyes. Just as I wanted to utter an excuse, he started talking again while lightning a smoke.

“Ah, since you are a human they probably wouldn’t have taken you with them.” He winked at me. *What a convenient explanation!* I nodded eagerly.

“Well, there were many monsters. One of those is the snow wolves around here, roaming around in big groups, hunting everything that moves. But they only hunt in the winter, when the snow is laying on the ground. They probably have a bad time this year, though.”

Wolves classify as *monsters*? I sighed silently, letting my shoulders slump. Wolves were *no* monsters. How sad, just when I thought my life might have taken a turn for the better.

“But sometimes there are still these massive boars and bears. They can become gigantic, *especially* those pesky bears.”

“Massive boars and bears? How big are they?” I asked, my mouth falling open. *Maybe they would not be monsters, but gigantism qualifies for me!*

“Around ten meters or so. One of my assignments here is to keep watch in the forest, spotting those behemoths, even if I will only stay for two more weeks. And if I would find one, a whole squadron will be send here, armed to the teeth. Many men let their lives while fighting those monsters, but the thought of what could happen if we left them unchecked...”

“May I ask you something, sir? Might those Squadrons consist of knights?” I asked, getting my hopes up again.

“Yes, of course. What else would they consist of, Shar- eh, girl?”

*This is really a fantasy world! Monsters! Knights! Crossbows! And if the blond boy was to be believed, even magic!*

Trying to not show how thoroughly shaken I was from his revelation, I cleared my throat and said “I am a boy.”

“Oh yeah, of course. My bad.” He said, laughing. “Well anyway, there is my small house. It is quite old and its ancestors even nursed the wounds of the old Naga Hero from Krahenfels, so it got some history to it.”

I nodded as if I would understand, but frankly the only thing that I got from that is that it would be old, nothing more. History had never been my strong suit.

“I forgot to ask, did you by chance encounter some woman roaming around?” He asked me, but I shook my head.

“I did not see anyone other than you in this forest.” I answered him, to which he only nodded.

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The hut was indeed old and small. There was a well on the outside, a rusty car and also some crops growing in a small field, but it was surrounded by trees on all sides, only a road made of dirt connecting to it, leading somewhere deeper in the forest.

The inside consisted of four rooms: The kitchen with a food storage, a bedroom, a big living room and a small, ancient bathroom. "I am sorry, but if you want to take a bath, you have to do that in the city. Since the laws for historic buildings say we aren't allowed to change anything in here, we only have the bucket with water from the well. Let me heat some for you." the old man said, taking a metal bucket with water to the living room and putting it up over the fire place.

"Thank you, sir." I said, having already undressed the muddiest part of my clothes. My trousers and shoes were completely covered in dirt, the same as my jacket. I checked the pockets of them before I gave them to the old man who wanted to wash them. They were empty except for the stone that the blond guy had praised as a relict, which I promptly hid in another pocket.

Also he had protested at first when I tried to take of my trousers, but luckily for me there was a second pair of pants under it, so he accepted it with a pained expression.

I took the bucket with warm water with me into the bathroom and started to undress. The shirt I wore had, much like the jacket, a hole on both sides stained with dark blood. The old fart had asked me if something happened, but just when I was considering how to best explain something weird like this, he said it was fine and he was sure it looked worse than it was.

But two surprises awaited me under my shirt.

The first surprise were the two small knives taped carefully to my upper arms. They were flat and carefully wrapped in such way that they would not cut into my flesh when I moved my arms. The tape made them feel like normal skin under the shirt, so I had not noticed them at all until I saw them.

The other surprise was my chest. It was still sticking out a bit, even though the rest of my body seemed completely skinny and even muscular at some spots.

I sighed exhausted, remembering how often I proudly declared to start exercises soon and to loose weight to my ex, but I never did anything in the end... and even gained weight instead. It was a depressing memory.

Next I took of the pants and my underwear, only to discover something else. Or rather, to discover that something was missing. Right in my underwear, something I had all my life in my old body, was *not* present on this body. Instead there was *something* else.

That is right, I was in the body of a girl now. I changed sex. Lost something I always had, gained something I never wished for. Panic washed over me in an instant, letting me freeze in the middle of the motion.

*How do I handle this? How do I behave now? I mean, I probably will behave like always, but still! This is confusing! Am I still me? Does this change anything? Is it okay if I just pretend to be the other gender just because I was the most comfortable with it? Maybe I should just do that, ignore the facts between my legs and just state what I had been? Surely no one will notice!*

With another big sigh I started moving again, ignoring what I had just seen and took the towel to start wiping my body clean, leaving the knives taped to my arm. I did not want to explain why I was suddenly carrying to knives to the old fart. And honestly, I should be more wary of him, even if he helps me for now.

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I left the bathroom and entered the kitchen where the old man was stirring something in a pot. The warm water he had prepared for me had felt like a blessing on my numb body, now the smell of food in the air made me really hungry.

The old fart looked at me with a smile “Oh, you are finished. Good, I just finished up heating the soup. I also grilled some carrots, so have your fill.”

He placed a bowl together with a plate on the table, signing me to sit down. I just did as he wanted and immediately began to shovel the soup into my mouth, ignoring the grilled carrots he put next to me. Only after I already ate half of the soup I noticed I had not thanked him yet, immediately doing so.

*It has been a long time since I had eaten together with someone. And... I missed it.*

“Oh, the cover of a spoiled brat. I wonder who the target is...” the man muttered. Well, seems like I appeared that way with my behaviour.

*I'm sorry... it just has been a long time.*

After I finished the soup I thanked him again, leaving the grilled carrots completely untouched. The man did not say anything and ate them himself, not showing any anger. Chewing the last carrots he starred at me, seeming to muster me with his gaze.

“Well, how is the *withered tree* doing?” He asked me, his smile gone now, pronouncing the withered tree like it would have some deep meaning.

I tilted my head, trying to think of a response. *I did not see some withered tree, but maybe it is something I should have seen on the way, or something that is from those “Nagas” he spoke of earlier. Well, better play it safe.*

“No big changes as far as I know.” I replied, which let the smile return to his face. “I’m glad to hear that. And when you are done, you can come back to me.” he

said, giving me a piece of paper. *What do you mean with when I am done?!*

I also forced myself to smile and tried to ignore the impulse to ask that question, looking at the piece of paper he had pressed into my hands. On it were two creatures, their lower bodies that of a snake, the upper half that of a human, with one of them using their lower half to slither around the other one. They both formed a perfect X this way, making it seem to be some kind of symbol.

“Uh... thank you.” I said, unsure what he expected of me. But my reaction seemed to be the right one. “No need to thank me. Also I would love if you would stay a bit, but I fear that we both still need to take care of a few things.”

*Huh? Was he saying I should better leave for now? Was it because really thought I was a spoiled brat? Did I offend him? Ah, I'm sorry, old fart!*

“Yes, of course.” I said, maintaining my smile. “I just, uh, would like to know how to get back to the next settlement. It has been a while since I had been around this part.” I lied, hoping he would not notice. “Sure, just follow the dirt road, you will be back in the city after a few hours.” he replied, standing up. *Oh, so just follow the road, that was convenient.*

“But there will not be any monsters that will attack me, right?” I asked him, to which he only laughed.

*Huh? I mean, if this was a fantasy world that question was not that far fetched, right? Or was it maybe because of how close we were to the city, making the surrounding space safe, just like in some RPGs?*

I thanked the old man one more time for his hospitality. He smiled at me.

“Goodbye, girl. Maybe we will meet each other again soon.”

Annoyed I shouted back “I am a boy!”

“Of course, of course.” he waved me off without even looking at me. Still pouting at him I started to put on the jacket and the trousers he had put near the fire place to dry and went on my way, following the dirt road like he told me to.

*If this was a fantasy world just like I thought it would be, my next mission was to find the adventure guild and become an adventurer, making money for myself and start finding the heroines. And probably try to escape from being arrested for helping bank robbers, but that was a problem future me would have. Sounds simple.*

*Time to start my fantasy world live!*

*Oh, wait, did I even have any powers?*

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The dirt road leading to the city was just a small path through a big forest that seemed kind of dead and lonely without any leaves around. Bored by those sights I started shouting things like *open status* or *open menu* and the like, trying to use some

magic I might have. It did not work, so I tried reciting some spells I remembered from books, games and shows. But no matter what I did, nothing happened, no hidden game elements appeared and no fireball was shooting from my palms. *That blond guy did question the existence of magic in the first place. No wonder it wasn't that easy.*

The only big difference I noticed was that my body had more stamina, as I was not tired even after walking for a few hours now. Considering how much time I was spending with walking today, my old body would have already given up after half of it.

"Maybe I have a special purpose, and there is a hidden reason in being brought to this world. Maybe it needs my help to stop some super evil organization from destroying the world like those robbers I helped, or maybe a demon lord will rise to power in time, and only I can stop him..." I muttered, still dejected over the lack of any game elements in this world. "Anyway, where is this *god* that got me here? He forgot to tell me anything at all!"

Thinking back on how that featureless face just had appeared before me still shocked me. Well, it was still only a few hours ago, but wow, that face really gave me the creeps.

"But the matter of my purpose or special skills and magic aside, where is the main heroine? Or is this some kind of sick joke and I will become the heroine myself?" I shouted into the forest. I mean, I am a guy, kind of, and got into another world. It was a *standard troupe* that I would get a handsome girl as a side kick. Or at least one handsome boy with that new body of mine, even if I would never date a man. But the only people I met so far were an old fart and those two criminals who left me behind to die. Sure, that blond boy *did* look handsome, but that smile of his while he was shooting that rotating crossbow gun would surely haunt me in my dreams tonight. And that woman with that sexy getup and that voluptuous bust? Well, she would be a candidate if she hadn't left me behind with that taped down gas pedal. That could have killed me! *Let us just ignore that I had tried to do that myself...*

I let out another sigh. It had been an hour since I started walking back to the city, yet nothing changed in the view around me. The old fart said it would take a few hours, but never how many.

And there was the fact that the whole situation seemed kind of weird. No one was looking for me. No cars, no sirens, nothing. Surely they should have something like a police force if they have cars. And of course they would start to look everywhere if some thieves just stole a literal truckload of gold from an *international* bank. Those *had* to appear, no matter what.

*Thinking about it, why should I care now? They did not seem to search for me, and if*

*they would not figure out I was even connected with that whole affair it would only benefit me. All is well that ends well, right?*

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I should not have brushed those worries away like nothing. Or better yet, instead of just falling into a state of only concentrating on my thoughts, I should have looked at the road ahead of me.

*Too bad I would not have seen the car with those useless eyes of this body anyway.*

“Young boy, would you please tell us your name?” asked the officer standing before me. He wore an blue police uniform that reminded me of those Guards standing still for hours, guarding the palace from a royal family in my old world. And that large black hat made out of wool on his head was looking so weird I wanted to laugh out loud. The only thing stopping me was the seriousness of the situation.

“Eh...” I started, unsure what to answer. I could use my name from my old world, of course, but that was not a name I was proud of. Some of my old classmates had often made fun of me because of it, and that was not a nice memory.

“I am... Shima?” I wanted to state, but it turned into a question at the end. The name I chose was the name those two criminals had called me, right before they left me.

The policeman furrowed his brow at my weird way of answering, but chose to not pursue it any further. Instead he looked around at the forest around us, ignoring the police car behind him in which his partner sat. “Well, seems like a quite weird spot for a young boy like you to wander around. And your clothes are tattered at the chest. Did something happen to you?”

I let out a silent sigh, regretting once again that I had not looked at the street ahead so I could hide from them. The man seemed to interpret my silence as unwillingness to talk and got on his knee before me, putting a hand on my shoulder. “If something happened to you or someone is abusing you, you can tell us. I promise, nothing will happen to you. We will protect you.”

Oh. Oh! So *that* was how I did look to him. *Well, how do I get out of this now?* I was already twenty-six in my last world, so I would like to imagine that I am quite capable of living my own life, if I may say so!

*... Well, okay, I could not. That was a lie. I never was capable of it.*

But still, I would rather not tell him that I just got here from another world. And even if I told him something like that I had a memory loss I would surely end up somewhere strange. Heck, were the parents of the girl I was now living in even alive? I guess not if she was part of such a dangerous robbery. So how big was the chance that I would end up in some orphanage or a mental ward?

*How to talk my way out of it?*

“Ah, no, its not like this...” I said with a nervous smile to the officer before me.

“I just got lost after walking around aimlessly, but I was just on my way back home. And that hole was just from a stupid branch that I got stuck on.”

He looked at my shoulder, probably thinking about the hole that was on my back he had seen after the car had stopped behind me.

“*Twice.*” I added with a slight cough.

“*Twice.*” repeated the officer, his eyes mustering me, his brows narrowing.

“Anyway! I promise I am returning to the city right now and that I did not run away or someone hurt me. So please, just let me go.” I pleaded, looking firmly into his eyes while forcing a smile on my face.

“So you say, but it would still be quite a walk. And I also would like to talk to your parents.” He replied, his brows still furrowed.

“Please, it will only make trouble for my parents if a police car would stop at their door and drop me off. I would not want to do that to them.” I lied, hoping that line I learned from some movie I once watched could help me.

He continued to look at me, saying nothing for a few seconds. To my surprise he finally nodded and patted on my shoulder. “Well, I do not think that you saying that you are going home is a lie. But please be careful on the way, and if you need help you can always rely on us. Do not hesitate to ask for help, okay?”

He relaxed, now a smile on his face. “And I would love to bring you at least to the city myself, but sadly there is another pressing matter we have to attend to. You wouldn’t have seen a woman on the way here, would you?”

I shook my head what let him grimace for a split second before he smiled again.

He shuffled a bit through my hair, ignoring my displeased look, and turned around, wishing me a nice evening. With that he returned to his car, looked at me one last time with a smile and drove away, going the way I was coming from. He said he had some business to take care of out there, though I could not imagine what exactly what it could be except the hunt for those robbers that robbed a bank. And if it was that, he just had let one of them go free.

*I had been lucky again.*

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With slumped shoulders I arrived at the city. “Finally...” I let out, tired from the long walk. If it had not been for that I might have said something cool like “Here I come!” with a hand on my hip and my finger pointing to the city, but that just seemed too cumbersome to me now. And, despite wearing comfortable and light boots the former body inhabitant had chosen, there were painful blisters forming on my feet. To top it of my ears and my face had started burning and the back of my hands turned



red, also burning. *Did I touch something weird in that swamp?*

I chose to ignore it for now, having no other choice for now.

In a game, the next step would be to go to an Inn and stay for the night so I could join the adventurer guild the next day. But since I had no money on me that option would probably not be available for me. Maybe I could sell this fancy pebble in my pocket, but honestly I doubted if it would be worth anything.

*Too bad that this girl had nothing else but the knives on her.*

The city felt oddly familiar from my old world and it was a feeling I did not appreciate. It was located inside a crater spanning a wide distance and grew to the edge on the outside. In the middle of that crater was a small hill, a medieval keep towering there, built out of stones. It even featured a wall around the medieval houses located around it. But further you got from the middle, the more modern the buildings became, resembling those from my old world at the farthest edge. And at the edge of the crater there were even some skyscrapers, though they were comparatively small considering the height of only hundred thirty meters at most. *Nothing compared to those giant skyscrapers in my old world. Still, it was quite a beautiful view I had on the way here. And they even build a small platform for tourists! ...Is what I would have said if it wasn't for me being unable to recognize anything past my nose!*

All of that knowledge how the city looked came from a small wooden board with some info letters picturing it, promoting some place where there was a kind of big battle in the past, how some important hero had done this and that and went along that very route I just walked. Below that there was a poster depicting the whole city from above, lining out the way the city grew the past few years with lines around the center. The most annoying part of all of this was that I had to press my head against the glass protecting those info flyers from the weather to be able to even read it while the breath of my nose was getting the glass between us foggy.

Even the big sign upon entering the city spelling "Welcome to Krahenfels" in big letters, and I mean *big* letters, was something I almost had to stand in front of to be able to read it. Did the people in this world invent cars and crossbows together with windows but somehow forgot lenses? Or was it rather that the former owner of my body had been quite an idiot? Or did she just lose them on her escape?

While I was once again lost in thought I traveled the street down further. Some time ago the street had turned from dirt to asphalt, even having those white lines drawn on it like in my old world. And now there were big office buildings to my sides, each of them looking the same boring way, giving me the vibe of my old world. *Honestly, what kind of crappy fantasy setting was this? If I wanted to go into a world of swords and magic, something like this was an absolute no-go. Whatever kind of god tried to grant my wish had been really sloppy with his choice.*

I let out a big sigh, forcing myself to walk forward. For now I only wanted a place to

relax, nothing more. I was tired, I was blind and I was getting frustrated.

Not to forget the most important question: where should I spend the night?

*If there wont be a heroine appearing soon to help me, or some big event happening, I will be pretty screwed. Please do not let me down, god, I beg of you! I will even take the usual event of some mugs threatening a girl in a back alley!*

Losing my hope in that god after looking around at the office buildings and the people wearing clothes from the 19th century around me I groaned, ignoring the weird stares they were giving me and continued my way into the middle of the city, hoping to find at least *something* that could help me.

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After another hour of walking down the road between those boring office buildings I reached a marketplace. It was a big open plaza surrounded by shops with market stalls standing everywhere despite the slowly setting sun. The stuff they were selling was lying on their tables, some of the owners promoting the freshness of their stock. In the middle of the plaza was a big statue of a mix between a male human and a snake, similar to the creatures building the X on the piece of paper that man had given me.

*Was this what monsters did look like in this world? Or was it just from mythology, like those griffins and dragons some nations had on their banners?*

Ignoring that train of thought I went through the stalls next to me, trying to evade the crowd so I would not get lost in it. Sometimes I thought I saw something strange in the masses, but before I could even catch what it was it had already moved out of the range I could discern what had caught my attention.

After some strolling through the market I found a stand selling pretty stones. Remembering that weird pebble in my pocket I stopped and took another look at the wares. Yep, the owner was selling pretty stones in all colors. Was this some magic stone shop? Magic crystals dropped from monsters maybe? Or could you cast spells with them? Was it fuel for everything in this world, powering the cars and trucks that looked like they were designed like the ones from my old world, coming straight from the 40s?

*The possibilities were endless and I could not wait to hear what kind of treasure they would be and what amazing stuff you could do with them!*

“When you wear this stone around your left arm, it will change colors and show you how your mood is. And that one is in the color of a happy love, so if you gift it to your lover, you might get blessed. Or how about this one here? It is kind of a mix between brown and yellow, but on the inside there is a small insect, captured in all its beauty. Not popular with the ladies, still a nice souvenir for a young boy like you!”

I had asked the shop owner, an old lady, what kind of stones she was selling, but I was absolutely shocked by how *normal* this was. It was just like those shops at markets in my old world and no trace of magic! Hiding my disappointment I maintained my smile.

“Would you please tell me if I could sell this?” I handed her the stone, not sure if I would like the answer. After she appraised my stone with a bored look she laughed.

“Boy, you are funny. We are *selling* things, not *buying* them. I know a few shops that still had that practice twenty years ago, but nowadays it is only selling for us.”

*And there goes the trope from RPGs, where you can sell everything you have to every merchant in the game.*

“And as far as I can see, this is just a small stone with some carvings in it. Its not even a gem, and the carving has no real pattern. I do not think that would sell at all, even if you were to go to a pawn shop.”

“I... see.”

She handed me the stone back and I quickly left, not wanting to be pressured by her into buying anything I could not afford anyway.

Exhausted I made my way to the middle of the plaza, sitting down below the metal sign on the statue saying “*Sha Rothwin - The Brave Warrior That Saved Krahenfels With His Selfless Action*”.

“What a waste...” I muttered silently looking at the crowd. The situation was looking grim. I had no money, no place where I could spend the night, no idea how this society even worked and no idea how I should go forward now. I had reached the city, yet my situation did not improve at all.

“I am back in the same situation I had found myself in before I changed worlds. But I don’t think I can muster the courage to try and jump again...” I muttered to myself, slumping my shoulders.

“Maybe soon the heroine will appear and save the day. That’s how it is supposed to go, right?” I asked with a chuckle and hugged my knees, fighting back the tears forming in my eyes. I wanted to stay like this for a bit to catch my breath and sort out my feelings. But the burning in my hands, my nose and my ears suddenly was forcing itself into the center of my mind, keeping me from relaxing at all. I let out an angry groan and stood up, ignoring the pain from my tired legs and the blisters on my feet, forcing myself to continue searching for-

*Search for what exactly? A place to stay?*

Not being able to sit still I started walking again into a random direction. Passing through the stalls I intended to go to a random street and search for my luck or a heroine to appear, but I caught something in the corner of my eyes when I passed a stall near a side alley.

I turned around and saw some glasses on display.

“Interested?” Asked a manly voice, the owner of the stall. I nodded slowly. “Do you have any glasses for short sighted people?”

The man nodded. “Yes, of course. How bad is it?” His voice sounded stiff, without emotions.

“Very bad. I cannot see your face without coming even closer.” I answered honestly.

“Oh. Well, I do have a pair for that, but their price is a bit high at that strength.”

I gulped. Here there was the solution for one of my problems, lying just before me, but I had no money to even pay for it.

“...May I try it?” I asked, my voice almost giving out. “...Sure.” The man said after a short pause, probably because of the big hole in my clothes. *I surely must look suspicious.*

“But please be careful with it and do not touch the lenses.” He took something out of a cylindrical box and put it on a tray, sliding it to me. With shaking hands I took the glasses and put them on, trying to heed his instructions. Suddenly the blurry colors around me went clear, my vision now finally returning to how it had been once before in the old world.

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“And, how is it? You look quite shocked.” The stall owner asked, his voice still expressionless, but I continued to stare at him, not believing what I was looking at.

Just like the statue in the middle of the plaza, he had the upper half of a human. But just a bit above the table his lower half was turning into a big snake tail that surely had to be around 3 meters. The tip of it was behind him, moving left and right. His ears were long and just as brown as the scales on his tale. And when he opened his mouth to ask me that question, I could clearly see two big fangs peeking out from his upper jaw, together with a very long and thin red tongue. And his pupils! They were a vertical slit!

*Okay, now this really was a fantasy world! Hybrid humans! Monster girls! Oh, all the possibilities! Will my heroine be a harpy? Or maybe a slime girl? Hopefully she will be human, but I guess demi humans would also be nice!*

Forcing myself away from staring at him and the thoughts entering my heads I glanced around, watching the crowd around me that had only been a colorful blob before. There were a lot of humans, but among them were a lot of different species of human hybrids. I saw other snakes, pigs, cats and even spiders among the mix. Okay, that was definitely a wild choice for crossings, but that was okay. The fact that I really was in a fantasy world now alone was enough to make me happy and cat girls surely were a huge plus in my books.

“So, you gonna buy it?” The stall owner behind me asked, dropping my mood again. Yeah, right, I forgot for a moment that I did not own the glasses and that I had to return my vision to him, going almost blind once again. Reluctantly I turned around, glancing at the cylinder he took the glasses from. There was a sticker for what seemed to be the strength and a high number on the price tag.

Just when I put the hands on the glasses I was wearing to put them back, an old man came to the stall. “Hey Shozzo, do you still have those glasses I tried today? I changed my mind about them.” the man shouted, placing himself on the other end of the stall. With my hand still on the glasses I was wearing, I glanced at the other models that were on display. There were other eyeglasses with weaker lenses than those I was wearing. And the prices were even less than half of what the glasses on my nose would cost.

“So you want to take them now? Sure, let me get them.” The stall owner said. With shaking hands I finally took of the glasses, putting them back at the tablet, turning the world into a colorful blob again.

Shoving the tray with the expensive glasses I just tried back, I could not resist the growing urge in me and grabbed one of the less expensive ones, instantly spinning around and running away.

“Hey! Thief!” The man shouted after me while I was putting the glasses on. *I just stole something. I just stole something from the nice man!*

“I am sorry!” I shouted back over my shoulder, running as fast as I could. I felt disgusted from my own actions, but now I could hardly return and put them back. Also I needed those, without them I was practically blind! He surely would not mind that much, since I even took one of the less expensive models. *Or at least I would like to believe that*, I thought while continuing to run through the crowd, entering a side alley after slipping through two other stands selling bread and vegetables each. Only after running until I was out of breath I finally stopped in a desolate corner, falling on my butt and leaning against the wall. There was a strong smell here, but I did not care. *I swear, I did not want to do this! I will give you your money when I get some, so please forgive me!*

Trying to calm my breath I looked around, trying to spot any pursuers. Fortunately, there were none, but I noticed that the strength of the lens was not quite enough. Things still were a bit blurry, but at least I could see into the distance now, and that was a huge increase for me.

*But still, to steal something... even if I was desperate, I never felt so ashamed before. This really is a new low, even for me...*

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After I had calmed my breath I continued my journey through the city. The most important thing now was to get a place to spend the night. Even my former goal of finding an adventure guild or something similar was now only an afterthought, or maybe just a wish with the rate things were going. The sun had long since settled, the only light remaining the street lamps that seemed to run with electricity.

*So they even have discovered electricity? Next thing I know and I will even find mayonnaise is already a thing here, along with anything else that those protagonists invent and sell to get rich in another world.*

I continued walking aimlessly through the streets until I arrived at something that seemed to be a big medieval palace, its front gates wide open with a garden behind it. Opposite the gate a very broad street made of stone slabs leading downhill, right to the center of the crater the city was in, going on for a long while. At the end of that long street there was the medieval keep that was supposed to be the middle of this city, standing on top of a small hill.

Even though the road was big enough to at least fit two lanes for cars into each direction, only people were walking in the middle of it, letting it seem like a pedestrian zone.

Turning around again I took another look at the castle. Just two of the many windows were bright, giving it an empty feeling supported by a single window having iron bars before it for some reason.

*What a waste of space. So many people could fit in there. And I surely would not mind spending a night in such a nice palace...*

After a short moment of consideration I stepped through the open gates.

*I mean, if they were open, I could enter, right? Surely no one would mind.*

Following that questionable logic I went on, entering the garden around the palace. Since it seemed to be winter the trees and bushes without leaves were giving it a dreadful look in such a dark night, but I did not mind since I still had those two knives tied to my arms. *Not that I would want to hurt someone or even knew how to fight.*

Strolling around the garden I found a bench next to a small pond. I knew that some homeless people in my old world were sleeping on benches sometimes, so maybe this would be a fine place for me. *Not that I had any alternatives.*

I lied down on it, looking at the pond next to me. It was dark already, meaning I could not see much, but the few splashing sounds that sometimes came from it calmed my soul, letting me relax a bit in the cold. The bench was hard and not comfortable at all, but I was too tired to even care about that. The only thing that was keeping me awake now was the burning pain that still came from the back of my hands, my nose and my ears, but after a short time tiredness swept over me and I fell asleep.

Only to be woken up after what felt like just a few seconds. Someone was poking my shoulders with something hard and I could see light behind my eyelids. Slowly I opened them, trying to push the annoying thing that was poking me away.

“Hey, no lingering here.” said the ruffian, still poking me.

“Sure, sure..:” I replied, half asleep, and stood up. The ruffian was wearing a knight uniform with metal armor and poked me with the wooden end of his spear, forcing me out of the gates. He closed them behind me and locked them with a key from the inside, showing no mercy to my pleading looks.

Too tired to look for another place I slid down the wall next to the gate, closing my eyes and swiftly falling asleep again, once again ignoring the cold that crept up to me.

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*Someone was shaking me. Again. Can a man get no rest around here?*

Once more I opened my eyes, my mood sour from being woken up like this *again*. It felt like I only had been sleeping for a few minutes again and my whole body was aching, also my nose had started running. But looking around I saw... a black blob before me, stretching a hand wearing black gloves out and shaking me at my shoulder. Confused why I could not see anything I tried to rub my eyes, but it still did not help.

*Oh right. I was inside a new body after I woke up in this strange new place. And I needed to wear glasses now.* I stretched out my hands, searching for the glasses around me that seemed to have fallen from my nose while I was sleeping.

Seeing I was searching for something the black blob stretched out the other hand, reaching me the glasses I was looking for. “Thank you...” I muttered, putting them on.

The black blob turned into a young girl, illuminated by the sun that was just rising. At least I assumed it was a girl because of the expensive looking black dress she wore. It went a bit past her knees and was decorated with some golden embroidery and frills, but her face was hidden from a big hood she wore over her head, leaving only the lower part of her face visible.

“Is everything alright?” She asked me with a smile. “That is quite a weird place to spend the night for someone as young as you.” She continued, sitting down on her knees. I wanted to nod and tell her that I was alright, but well... my situation was looking grim. Still, I did have some pride left, so just admitting it to a young girl just did not feel right. Especially if she seemed so caring about a stranger.

I also got on my knees, formulating the answer in my head.

“I... just have a bit of a rough time right now, but nothing that wont be fixed in the

future.” There. The perfect answer. Not exactly denying that its not going my way, but giving a positive outlook on the future so she would not think less of me..

“Is that so? I cant imagine what kind of rough time would put someone as young as you on the street though.” She giggled a bit at the end, but she was still facing me, as if she was expecting another answer.

“I am... kind of in need of money right now... since I have no place to stay...” I admitted, hanging my head. She tilted her head at that response.

“Say, how old are you?”

“I... don’t know...” I answered her honestly, my head hanging even lower now.

*I knew nothing about this body except its name!*

“You do not know your age...? Well, I am not really the best person to judge you for that, but I guess it is still unexpected in these days.” She pointed straight behind her.

“If you do not want to stay with your guardians and have no one else, you should head to the orphanage. Or make up with your guardians, if that is possible.”

I shook my head. “I... really do not have anyone like this... I guess?”.

The girl mustered me again, a bitter smile on her face. “Then I guess you really should head for the orphanage. It might be a big step, but if you have no other choice it would be the best you could do.” She put a hand on my head, slowly rubbing my hair. I flinched a little at her touch, but I knew she only meant well, so I let her.

“Its just down this big street located in the keep you can see from here. They will surely take you in and give you a place to stay. I can even guarantee that it is the best in the world!” She said with a proud voice, holding her right fist to her chest.

*Is it just me or does her right hand look a bit weird under that glove?*

“Uh... well... I will think about it...” I said half hearted, having ruled the orphanage out for myself already. *Nothing would convince me to enter a place full of children! Nothing would make me want to be treated like a kid ever again or even spend time with them!*

“I still would recommend it to you, and the earlier you go there the better. And if you would reject that and have no place to return to, I am afraid I would not know what to do either...” Her voice sounded a bit sad at the end, and it seemed like she had completely seen through my thoughts. With my cheeks burning from being read by her like an open book I jumped on my feet.

“I-I think I have something to take care of, so I better go now. So until next time or so.” I said, my voice shaking like crazy. The girl giggled at my reaction, holding her hand before her mouth. “Consider meeting me as a token of luck, most people never meet me in their lifetime nowadays. Please stay safe and ask for help if you need it.”

I gave her a hesitating nod.

“I hope we will meet again under better circumstances. And good luck.” She shot me



a sweet smile, making me feel guilty for some reason.

Unable to face her after her worrying about me and giving her a lame excuse to escape I ran into a street on the side, not following the big road to the keep. Recalling her parting words I guessed she would be some kind of shut in that would only go out when she absolutely had to. I knew that feeling too well, since the first time I left my home after five years was the day I had been kicked out from my landlord.

*But here I am, caught in the same situation I had in my old world. What a sick joke.*

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“Please let me work here!” I shouted, bowing before the man in front of me. It was the tenth place I was trying that, but his answer was the same as the rest.

“You do look still young, but I am afraid I cannot teach you here, and with that I can also offer you no work. Sorry.”

“... I am sorry for bothering you...” I muttered, turning around and heading for the door. “Please wait a moment.” the man behind me said. I knew already what he was gonna say, since everyone I asked today always told me the same thing, just like the girl in black this morning, but I turned around anyway.

“You do look like you are still young enough, so it would probably be best if you went to the orphanage if you want to find a workplace.”

*Yep, exactly the same sentence. Honestly, even the wording was just the same. Did they study that line for a performance or what?*

I slumped my shoulders, opening the door. I could not even bother enough to answer that line anymore.

“Well, if you are really desperate and that is no option for you... I guess you could try your luck somewhere else. But I do feel guilty even telling you about this...” the man said.

I turned around, staring at the man with new found hope in my eyes. “Please, tell me!” I demanded, letting him take a step back. He hesitated for a long time, nervously looking everywhere but my eyes.

“All right, if you insist...” He sighed, shaking his head and putting his hand to his temple. “Please consider it as a last resort, like when you really, *really* have nowhere left to go. And if you are desperate enough to even *consider* this, you could try your luck on the main street in the east from the keep. Just when you pass the outer walls from the keep you go to the left and you will see what I mean.”

He let out a sigh and silently muttered “Why did I even tell him that... is he even old enough...?”

*Now I was curious. What kind of place was there?*

I thanked the man and left his store. The building I was in right now was one made for a construction company and I had figured that they would surely need another pair of hands for hard work. Well, I guess that had been just another flub. When I left the store I let out another sigh. Surely *someone* would want me to work for them in this city! There just *had* to be. I did not spot another homeless person around the city, so there surely must be work for everyone, right?

*Right?*

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Exhausted after walking around all day I found myself sitting on a bench, right in front of the walled of keep. There was a small plaza here, but it was empty except for a few kids.

I looked around and stole a glance at the big statue standing in the middle of the plaza, showing a young girl holding the right hand of a grown man whose face was destroyed, the crown on his head broken. A topless lady that was half human and half snake was curling her tail around both of the humans and holding a spear as if to protect them while also holding the right hand of the young girl.

I wondered what history there was behind the destroyed face of the man since the damage to his crown and his face seemed to be an act of vandalism. Maybe it had been the grudge of some other ruler in the past, as he was the only one who had his face destroyed like this

While I was observing the statue, the kids on the plaza started yelling. A group of girls were throwing around a smaller girl between them and then stepped on a puppet that slipped out of her hand and fell on the ground.

"If you want to play with us just say so! Stop your creepy silence already!" one of the girls shouted, the other ones sneering. I shortly considered standing up and helping the girl, but then I changed my mind, staying put.

I had some similar experiences in my childhood, but when an adult started to meddle into a fight they always made it worse for everyone in it. The other kids would still hate the victim, sometimes even blaming him for that too, calling him names like chicken or worse, teasing him on every opportunity for that.

*I hated going to school. And this orphanage seems like it would just be a repeat of that past I had. I would rather go to hell than to go back to school, back into a place filled with other cruel kids and overprotective parents together with those stupid teachers!*

But soon after the start of the fight an elderly woman came rushing from the keep with a black dress that reminded me of a nun uniform, consoling the crying girl and lecturing her bullies. I relaxed my fists, which I had unconsciously clenched. The

sun already started setting again and everyone I asked for work had turned me down today. With how things are going right now that place might be my only option left, but I would rather die before I end up there again. I am not sure I could live through the torture ever again.

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Following the direction the man had given me I arrived in the street he had been talking about. And upon seeing it I immediately understood why he was so hesitant to tell me about it.

*It was a red light district.* Women and men both walked around in thin and revealing clothes, talking to the people who were passing by. Some of those were following the light dressed people into a building, others rejected the offer and entered one of the stores between the love hotels and other establishments.

Wondering what I should do I wandered through the streets, stealing a glance at the few stores that sold exotic clothing with revealing properties, toys of all kind and one shop even putting the prostitutes behind windows, who were their bodies like an item. Between those stores there existed all the kind of clubs that I knew from my old world. Yet everything seemed cleaner and more civilized, unlike some of the districts I knew from my old world littered with trash, glass shards and a lot of creepy men.

The sun was already gone, only the pink and red neon lights promoting the stores were illuminating the street now. I continued my way, but lightly dressed women never talked to me.

*Did they think I had no money? Or was it because I looked too young?*

Not that it would matter to me anyway. I had lost all interest in things like that already in my own world after my ex left me.

*But what should I do here? Sell my new body? No! It's not even mine!*

After reaching the end of the street lined with adult clubs and stores I went between two buildings through a small alley, entering the less crowded street behind.

Some women were standing here, still lightly dressed, forming groups and talking about their latest customers. Ignoring their wild descriptions I went a bit further until I found a nice little spot next to a small staircase leading to a backdoor.

A mattress was leaning on the wall, looking a bit used with a few dark and yellowish spots. It did not look comfortable or sanitary, but beggars can't be choosers as they say. And in my case any soft place for the night was a bliss from heaven.

After checking that no one was around I sat down on it and enjoyed slowly sinking into the comfy foam. If I could spend the night on it, then surely my body would not feel as beaten as it did this morning.

*Maybe if I take it with me somewhere else and find a blanket I would not freeze to death like I almost did last night.*

And if by tomorrow evening I still did not find any work or another place to stay I would have to go to the orphanage. It would be a hard choice for me, but I was running out of options. I said I would rather die, but... this was not my own body. Sighing once again I closed my eyes, ignoring the rumbling of my stomach screaming for food and the red skin on the back of my hands that had started to peel off. I guess my nose and my ears would not look any better, but I did not know why. Did I catch some weird illness in the swamp? Or did I have some illness even before that? *Hell, I do not care about that anymore. In my situation I should be glad if I even survive until tomorrow morning. And if I survive, I will just do like all those people told me to and enter my personal hell, clinging to my life I had already given up once. Ha, I really am pathetic. I probably should have listened to the young shut in girl this morning, but instead I just ran away after ignoring her help, just like I did back then in my old world.*

At the memory of the girl waking me up this morning I paused for a moment.

*...Am I stupid?*

*Could she have been the heroine that would save me? The one I was looking for? Did I just miss a really big event by running away? And after that she even told me I had been lucky to meet her since she is a shut in! I missed the event! I missed the heroine! I got too nervous and butchered my future! Its game over for me!*

I squirmed around on the mattress, pressing my dirty hands on my face, cursing myself for being so dense. There had been a golden chance, but I was just throwing it away, not even noticing that it was happening!

*I was a pathetic failure of a human being and now surely my life was as good as over. I missed my chance and now I will probably be never lucky enough to ever get one like this before!*

"Huh?" A sound came from somewhere above me. Taking away the hands from my face I looked up, seeing a blond man with green eyes, his face being really handsome. "Huh?" I also said, staring at him.

That man was the lunatic criminal that made me help them escape with a bank robbery! He also seemed to recognize me, hastily taking out keys from his pocket and trying to open the door. "No!" I screamed, jumping to my feet and running up the stairs. But before I could catch him, he already opened the door, jumped in and wanted to close it. I threw my hands between the door and the doorframe, trying to block it with my fingers, but he slammed it close with full force without mercy.

I screamed from sharp pain and threw my shoulder against the door, opening it a bit and putting my foot in, avoiding to look at my hurting fingers out of fear to see blood.

“You were supposed to go to jail, idiot!” the man screamed behind the door, pressing against it to keep me outside.

“I told you I do not remember anything! And after that you put me on a suicide truck and left me to die!” I countered, also screaming.

“What do you mean by suicide truck? There was nothing wrong with it!” he shouted back.

“Nothing wrong? I never drove before! And without glasses I am practically blind! Also there were no brakes while the gas pedal was tied down, accelerating it more by the second! How could you *not* call that a suicide truck?!”

“What do you mean there were no brakes? You just have to pull the steering wheel! Even a kid could do that!”

I stopped pushing against the door for a moment, my mouth hanging open.

*Seriously?! You pull the steering wheel? What kind of stupid system was that?*

“How should I have known? I do not know anything about this world!” I shouted back after a pause, putting all my strength and threw my shoulder at the door once more.

To my surprise the door swung open without any resistance. I fell forwards in an ungraceful way, not even being able to stop the fall with my hands.

### 3: Gav And Alis

The blond boy was standing next to me, laughing at me while holding open the door. “You look stupid.” he snickered, not even hiding his schadenfreude while closing the door behind me.

“What do you mean with that?!” I shouted back, standing up while glaring at him. I wanted at least *some* explanations after they had abandoned me here!

“Nothing really, except that you really looked stupid right now.” he started laughing. When he finally stopped, ignoring the deadly stare I was still giving him, he pointed at me.

“So what do you want now? Is there a reason Mr. *I do not remember* is forcing his way into my home now?” He asked me, his face turning from smiling to a serious face in just a split second.

“Yes, there is a reason! I just woke up next to you, and then I find myself in the middle of a violent escape after a bank robbery! And to top it all off, instead of explaining anything at all you just tell me to go to jail and leave me to die!” I shouted at him.

“Do you know how hard it was to even survive in that truck? Without these glasses I could not even see the trees when I was finally out of the tunnel, let alone that train

that almost rammed me! And I just got lucky and survived the truck crash somehow! Then I come to this city, having no place to go, having no money and no idea how anything works in this society!”

After the stress I was constantly under since my arrival I was finally breaking down, letting it all out. Tears were flowing out of my eyes, even though I did not want them too. But now I could neither stop shouting at him nor could I stop telling him how miserable it was.

“I had to steal a pair of glasses to be even able to see anything around me! I had to sleep on the street in the cold, and got even thrown out and pitied by a young girl! And when I tried to find work so I could at least have *some* kind of life, everyone rejected me, saying they could not teach me!”

*Well, I did leave out some convenient things, like the option to go to the orphanage just as I was repeatedly told, but that surely did not matter right now.*

“Aha. And?” The guy asked me, sounding bored.

I just stared at him with an open mouth, not knowing how I should even answer to that. After I said nothing for a few seconds, he started speaking again.

“So that is quite some stuff you might have experienced, I get that. But what do you actually want? An apology? For what, following the plan we already made beforehand and you personally signed? Or just some pity for that sob story?”

“I want an explanation of what happened! I don’t know anything before I woke up on that truck and I do not know what might come of it in the future!” I shouted again.

He let out another bored sigh, scratching his cheek.

“Well, but why should I explain anything? If you get arrested, it would be better for me if you know as little as possible. Also I would rather not tell you anything that would incriminate myself, that would be plain stupid.”

I gaped at him. The worst thing was that he was not wrong. He had no reason to even tell me anything, and doing so would indeed be rather stupid. But of course, I only realized that now, having forced my way inside already.

Without any strength left in my body I fell back to my knees, burying my face in my hands. The tears that did not stop coming before now suddenly vanished, all that was left was the feeling of despair, any will I had until now just leaving me. *I gave up.*

“If that is everything you wanted, please leave now.” He said, sounding just as indifferent as before. Without a word I forced myself on my trembling legs and went outside without even looking back.

“And make sure you forget about this pla- *ouch!*” the guy behind me shouted at the end. “Would you come back please?” a warm voice said behind me, calling me back. I turned around, seeing the woman in the sexy getup who played the escape driver before.

“What this man conveniently forgot to say is that you still have some stuff you brought in a guest room here, and since you are already here this late and reek like foul eggs you should probably take a bath and stay the night.”

“Hey now...” the guy protested weakly, but a fierce look from the woman shot him down.

But I was not sure I should take this offer. The guy was completely right, and he just had thoroughly rejected me being here. While I was contemplating how I should answer, the woman stepped outside and grabbed my arm, pulling me inside, dragging me straight to the bath.

“I will bring you some clothes from Gav. They will be too big for you, but that is all I can offer you for now. And now undress already and go take a bath. Really, you stink!” She said that last part while closing her nose with her fingers, leaving me alone in the bathroom. It looked just like a bathroom from my old world, and a particular big one at that. It even had running water and a bathtub!

I hesitated at first before I finally started undressing and removed the knives from my arms. But when I was finally submerged in the hot water I felt like I could at least relax a little now.

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While I was soaking in the water the boy came in for a short time and put me some of his clothes on the ground while taking my old ones with him without even bothering to knock or look at me.

When he left I filled the bathtub with hot water and relaxed inside, but when I started to wash my hair, I started screaming. Suddenly the black hair turned white while leaving black stains on my hands and mudding the water and the tub.

The blond guy swung open the door just as I had jumped up, looking at the black droplets falling from my hair and sullyng everything, turning the tub and the water pitch black.

I looked at him. “There is weird stuff coming from my hair...” I said with a crying voice, tears in my eyes.

“You are a girl...” he said with a disbelieving voice, his brows furrowing.

“...”

Only now I noticed that I was not in my old body anymore. And well, I was naked. Figuring it was too late to hide my shame now, I let myself sink back into the black water. “... I am a boy.” I said with a weak tone.

“... But I just saw that you are a-” he started.

“Boy. That is correct.” I finished his sentence for him with an angry tone. He con-

tinued to look at me for a moment before he just shook his head and turned around, closing the door behind him.

Outside I could hear two voices talking to each other.

“Did something happen?”

“No... she-... he was just surprised that her- his hair is colored with ink. And I was surprised it turned completely white. No reason to worry about it. But are you sure we should even help her- him in the first place, Alis?”

“Gav... please. The plan failed anyway, so at least let us take care of the fallout. And you know I would never turn down someone needing help.”

I could register the voices, but my focus was still on my hair that suddenly changed color. *Ugh... so the old owner of this body had white hair...*

I started cleaning it once more, inspecting it again and again while doing so. The hair on my head was completely white. Not just very blond, but pure white.

After I finally cleaned my hair so much that no more color was coming of, I let myself slip back into the bath and started to look at the ceiling, hoping that all of this just had been a bad dream. With a big sigh I let myself sink deeper in the now black water, wanting to forget that I had just been seen naked. Even if this was not my own body, it still felt embarrassing.

*Anyway, what happened to the old owner of this body? Would she come back one day? And what would happen with me then?*

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After I finished my bath I put on the clothes the blond guy had left for me; a dark green sweater and underwear meant for men. Surprisingly his underwear seemed to fit me, even though it was a bit loose. But with his sweater I did not need any trousers since it reached my knees, making it feel more like a dress.

When I came out the woman led me to a small room on the second floor without questioning my new hair color. She excused herself and went out again, leaving me alone in the room.

There wasn't much stuff from the past inhabitant in here except for a small sportbag on the floor. Curiously I opened it, inspecting what it contained, but the content turned out to be disappointing.

It contained a two handed crossbow with some extra strings and a few bolts together with that black tape that had been wrapped around my arms before. Without much thought I threw both knives I had taken off before the bath in the bag. Those two criminals might be dangerous, but with those little things I couldn't do much against a crossbow.

While doing so I spotted a small package I had missed at first.



“Blue eyes... contact lenses...” I read out loud what was written on it.

*Could it be...?*

I went to the small mirror in the room that was hanging above a small sink and stared at my eyes. They were, in fact, blue.

And well, since my hair was dyed black when it was white and the old body owner had stored blue contact lenses in her bag... *only one way to find out.*

“... I will never wear contact lenses again, I swear.” I muttered after I finally got the last one out. Touching your own eye is quite an unpleasant experience, especially if you do not know if there is a contact lens in it in the first place. But now that I had removed them I could see the real color of my eyes. They were light red, almost pink, with a hint of blue near the pupils. And just when I muttered out loud “I seem to have albinism...” the door opened without knocking, the woman with the big bust entering the room. She seemed to have heard me and gave me a short look before she nodded.

“It seems like you do, yes. But I must say, it does look good. If you were a girl, I would like you to work for me.”

“Huh? You would let me work? Really?” I asked, tears forming in my eyes, hope blooming in my heart.

That was until the blond boy came in behind her. “She is the master of the brothels around here. As a *boy* I am sure you would not like that kind of work.” he informed me.

“Oh uh... yeah. I do not think I should...” I started, but the woman did not let me go that easily.

“Oh my, that is no problem, so stop trying to shoo him away, Gav.” She put her hand on his shoulder and smiled at me. “We have a lot of males working there, too, you know? So that is no problem!” There was a dangerous glint in her eyes. Next she turned to the blond boy. “Shima here with his girlish figure and exotic appearance would open us the doors for a completely new market!” she stated proudly, giving me looks like a predator eyeing its prey.

“I am absolutely not interested, thank you!” I stated with a firm voice. But she only laughed. “Don’t worry, most of the men that work for me said the same at the start. But it did not take long for them to succumb- I mean, *take a liking* to work for me.” she stated with a smile, pretending her slip up never happened, covering the mouth of the boy trying to protest.

After he surrendered she clapped her hands. “Anyway, forcing you to join the brothel is not my priority right now. First aid comes first!” she shouted, not even trying to hide her motivations leaking out. The blond guy put a small pouch on the floor and leaned on the wall.

“First aid? For what?” I asked, tilting my head.

“You have quite the sunburn on your face and your hands. Also your fingers that my lovely Gav smashed with the door turned purple already.”

I looked at my fingers, seeing that she was right. *And it just was a sunburn, no weird illness I caught in the swamp, oh man. I guess I was too stressed to see it that way.*

The woman sat down on the bed and signaled me to sit next to her with a cheery smile. I reluctantly did as I was told, but got a glimpse down her cleavage while doing so. With red cheeks I turned to look the other way, only to see the blond guy sneering at that.

“So cute! If only you were a bit older... the amount of customers you could get...” the woman next to me sighed, her own cheeks blushing. “I am a boy!” I protested, still avoiding looking at her.

She grabbed my arm and started rubbing some ointment on the back on my hands. “Your hand is so soft, and your fingers so long... I am kind of envious.” she muttered breathing heavily, still continuing to rub them. After she finished, she slid her fingers between mine. Surprised I turned back around to her and tried to pull my hand back, only to end up nose to nose with her somehow.

Before I could flee her other hand caught my chin, keeping my face close to hers. “Your eyes are shaking, but they are kind of nice to look at with that pretty color. And your white hair, it feels so exotic!” she said, her nose now touching mine. “And this pale skin, oh, how I envy you!”

“Alis, stop seducing the *boy*.” the blond boy said while chopping his hand on her head. The woman let go of my hand and backed away, laughing. “Sorry, I just could not resist. I have never seen someone like this before. I bet the men would line up to the palace to pay for him if he was a girl. Scratch that, even when he is a boy they would!” I went pale at that thought, backing away from her.

*Is this karma for everything I said to my ex after she cheated on me?*

“I guess my ex was right...” I muttered, hugging myself and crawling even farther away from the woman until my back hit the wall. *I had gone too far with I had said back then to her. Even if she had been the one to hurt me.*

“Your ex? You are not a virgin?” the woman asked, perplexed.

“Did you not lose your memory? How come you remember something?” the boy asked with a low voice.

Both came closer, but I could not crawl back any farther.

“Uh, well, it is not exactly that I lost my memories...” I said, laughing nervously.

“Uh huh. Tell us more, please.” the guy said, a scary look on his face now.

“Yes! I need to know if I can tag you as a virgin! They always sell for a high price!” the woman said, also completely serious with a dangerous glint in her eyes.

*I do not know which question of those two was more dangerous. Maybe I should have not said anything at all...*

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I started to explain them how I was trying to kill myself in my old world and some weird thing appeared, letting me black out just to wake up in the truck next to them, speaking a language I did not know and how it just started to make sense to me.

“So you say you come from a different world? Are you sure about that? Maybe you just hit your head *really* hard after that bolt went through your chest.” the guy commented.

“And what was that with your ex? Please tell me more!” the woman demanded while rubbing my ears, applying the ointment to them while using every chance to come closer to me.

“I mean, I might have hit my head... but still, I am telling the truth!” I shouted at that annoying guy. “I also can’t say anything about my current body, but I did have a girlfriend in the other world. We were together for two years.” *Before she ditched me, saying that I should finally take life seriously and stop being such a pathetic, lazy waste of space and get a job. I was really mad at her since she had already betrayed me at this point with another guy. I threw her out after I found out and became a shut in, proving that she and everyone else had been right about me.*

I let out a sigh at that memory. I mean, I understood why she left me at the time. We got together in school, but when we finished it I got fired from the job that I found after just half a year. Too depressed after what I had done I stayed at home doing nothing but play games. But even when I understood why she did it, actually accepting it... *that* was the hard part.

“Then let us just say you are a virgin and get you to the male brothel! The woman liking cute boys and the man wanting a female looking boy surely would pay thousands for that!” She said while clapping her hands.

“I refuse to work there!” I shouted.

The annoying guy chopped on the head of the woman. “Stop trying to sell the *boy* to the brothel. He looks too young for that, so wait a few years with that.”

*Exactly! Wait, no, don't do it in the future, too!*

She was kind of overwhelming, trying to get me into her line of work all the time. I just hope she does not find out that I am a woman, or else I will be in even more danger...

“Why would you need so much money, anyway? You both just robbed a bank the other day...” I asked while the woman was now rubbing the ointment on my face now.

“Well, technically that is right. But we did not steal that money to use it. Instead we threw it into a bottomless swamp to bury it, making sure no one can get it.” she said, still smiling.

“Wait.” I shook my head, trying to comprehend the logic behind that, causing her to grab my chin again and come closer to my face.

“Did you just say that you two robbed a bank only to throw the money away and never use it? Are you insane?” I asked perplexed.

“Alis, please!” the boy moaned, putting a head to his temple.

“He already knows way too much, so we can tell him everything now. It makes no difference for us. Also I am sure there would be far worse things for him if his identity ever got out~.”

I got the feeling that she said something really important about me there, but before I could question it the boy continued.

“Still, after all that work we put in there that is just *asking* for something to go south. We do not need any more risks!”

He let out a big sigh while the woman continued to rubbing ointment on my cheeks for quite some time now. “Well, so you say, but I do not think this boy would be that much of a threat to us. He did not just go to the police and play the hero with telling them about us. He could easily have done that to save his own hide!”

*Eh? I could have done that?* “Eh... yes. Exactly!” I said, trying to avoid looking at her face, something that was almost impossible with how uncomfortably close she was. “Stop joking like that, you know that would not be possible for him. Whatever, do what you want.” He responded, sounding tired and waving his hand, giving up on the matter. After that he sat down on the floor and looked at me while the woman did not stop rubbing my cheeks while getting red and breathing heavily.

“Let us start with a question for you in that case. Why do you think you were not arrested already?” The boy asked me disinterested.

I shrugged my shoulders. “Maybe they did not recognize me?”

“Wrong answer. It is because we robbed a bank, but no one was informed about it. The police simply does not know that something even happened, so there is not even an warrant for us.”

I tilted my head and tried to escape the cheek rubbing, but the woman started hugging my shoulder instead, rubbing her head against mine and preventing any escape, ignoring my protesting look. *So those two officers were not looking for me?*

“That does not make any sense at all. I mean, I could not see exactly *who* was following us when I woke up, but they *must* have noticed us.”

He nodded. “We were followed by some *kind* of police, indeed. But that police are not the local police forces but rather lackeys from the government. They are one of the reasons we robbed the bank in the first place.”

I couldn't make any sense out of that information. “So... how does that explain you robbing a bank and throwing away the money?” I asked, trying to push the

woman hugging me away, only to touch her breast by accident and giving up after that, just letting her do what she want for now.

“That is the easy part. We want to destroy the current government. That gold we stole was around eighty percent of all the gold the international bank held in its vault and what gives our paper currency its worth as far as we know. Now imagine what would happen if that info would get out into the open.” he said, donning an evil smile.

If the currency had its worth determined in the amount of gold hoarded in the bank, removing it would make the currency worthless, right?

*Was that really that simple? I guess I have to believe him for now.*

But if it did work this way, did he desire the chaos following inflation? I shuddered at the sight of his evil smile. “Would that not mean also problems for you? Why would you do that? It is like shooting into your own legs, it also effects you!”

“Oh, that’s not a problem for us.” the woman laughed, coming closer to my ear. “That is a sacrifice we are willing to make.” she whispered, blowing into my ear after that. Shivers went down my spine and I once more tried to get away from that female devil trying to seduce me, but she hugged me tight, holding me in place no matter how much I tried to escape her touch.

“I want to keep him, Gav!” She shouted, still pressing me into a hug, her breasts squishing against my face, ignoring my protests. “I am sure he alone could rack enough income for our brothels to survive if the economy would collapse!”

The blond guy, Gav, ignored her and continued. “Well, that was a part of the plan we made, but since you little annoying *nuisance* just *had* to lose your memory and not get yourself arrested and with that into the headquarters, we have to change our plans now. And since we did not prepare for that we can’t even use the gold as a pressure anymore. The whole plan has gone down the drain thanks to you.”

“Huh? Me getting arrested was actually part of the plan and not something you said to get rid of me?” I asked, trying to crawl out under the woman that was lying on my body now, her breasts still pressed against my head, but to no avail.

“Yes. The plan for you was to get close to our next target, and that was exactly why we hired you. Such a shame that it now all goes to waste, since the government reacted even exactly like we anticipated, putting the whole incident under the rug...” he let out a big sigh.

“Gav?” the woman above me asked in a sweet voice while pinning my arms to the bed so I was forced to face her. I tried to get away, but she was surprisingly strong.

“What is it, you horny hag?” he asked, annoyed. “Would it not maybe be better to actually keep him here for the time? I mean, if his body just learned our

language by remembering it, maybe some of the knowledge from his former inhabitant might still be in there? Or even the actual *boy* we want?"

"You really want to keep this brat here?" He asked, visibly annoyed even thinking about it.

"Well, you always wanted a little brother, and I like this one *a lot!*" she said, sitting down on my hips, still pinning my arms down, ignoring my scared face.

"But he would not even be a broth-" he started, shaking his head. "Stop saying that already, Alis, I was nine when I said that and I already changed my mind with *you* around! And that brat is useless, you just want his body!" he shouted, his expression turning even more sour. "Yes. And?" She asked, getting dragged out of the room from Gav, finally freeing me from that dangerous woman. "Lock your door if you do not want to find yourself selling your body in the middle of the night!" He shouted at me, closing the door behind them.

*As much as I did not like him, I feared he was right about that.*

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After locking the door I threw myself on the messed up bed from the attacks I had received, annoyed that I could still smell the perfume from that woman and the uncomfortable feeling of her warmth still lingering on my body.

I finally wanted to relax from this crazy situation I had found myself in, but my mind refused to do so. My future was uncertain, the people I was staying with were wanted criminals and the only other option I had was entering the orphanage or working for that horny hag. And if my former body inhabitant did have some place to stay or some family, I had no chance of finding out. The lack of clothes she had with her suggested that she *did* have some other place, but there had been nothing to indicate *where* it was.

*Maybe she hid it the same way she hid her identity with the contact lenses and the hair dye...*

I stood up again, carefully emptying the bag my former self had left here. I seriously wondered why the past inhabitant even bothered to possess something like a crossbow when there was not even any glasses in there. Did she seriously consider firing this thing without being able to see anything? She must have been crazy!

Frustrated I searched for anything that I could have missed. After carefully feeling over the bottom I stopped at a small dent I had missed before.

Carefully I searched for the opening, finding a hidden compartment. It contained an ID with picture of my new face with black hair and blue eyes. The name next to it stated was Shima with a minus where the last name should be, the rest of the information only describing my appearance.

So my name really had been Shima, it seemed. But why would she hide her true hair and eye color like this? *Did she want to hide her true identity or was this a fake ID?*

I put the ID to the crossbow, reaching into the hidden pocket once more. And to my surprise, there was something else in it.

A small etui that reminded me of the etuis for glasses from my old world. Carefully I opened them, hoping I could return the stolen item on my nose.

There were glasses inside, but they were broken and had dark spots smelling like iron on it. Ignoring those things I put it on my nose, but my vision got even worse than without. *Those glasses were not meant for me.*

I clicked my tongue. The girl that had lived in this body before me sure seemed to have quite a few secrets.

With a long and exhausted sigh I threw the etui back and let myself fall into the bed, immediately rolling my eyes at the scent of the woman still lingering on it.

*At least the bed was comfortable and better than sleeping on the street.*

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Gav woke me up the next morning, banging on the door until I finally opened it. He was standing there, wearing an apron and handing me the cleaned clothes I wore yesterday. While washing them he even made the effort to patch the holes in the chest. I was sure he just put that much effort in it to stop me from wearing his clothes any longer.

Having changed I left the room and looked around, registering what a nice house they were living in. The first floor was quite large with a big eating table and three chairs on each side, a big open kitchen and a relaxing area with two sofas and a couch with a coffee table. The second floor only was half the space of the first floor, only separated with a railing so you could look down. The whole space seemed comfortable and I guess it would be easy to relax in here.

“Alis, food is ready!” Gav shouted from the kitchen. The mention of food made my stomach grumble. The last time I had eaten was more than a day ago.

I ran down the stairs, the thought of at least getting to eat something blocking everything else in my mind.

“What do *you* want here?” Gav shot me a cold glance, putting two plates on the table with grilled meat and vegetables. One of the doors on the lower floor opened and a yawning woman in a ruffled night gown and bed hair.

*Not that my hair would look better.*

“Oh, you made breakfast today, Gav!” she said, a big smile appearing on her face.

“Sure, you even went and served some customers last night. I assumed you would be tired.” Gav said, holding out the chair for her. “You noticed?” Alis asked, putting

the spoon in her mouth.

Gav looked away from her, a sad expression covering his face for a moment. "You only do that nowadays when things aren't going that great, so I thought that I should help you in some way." he answered, also eating now. The two of them completely ignored me standing in the middle of the room like a useless decoration. *Maybe I should just flee? Put the things my past body inhabitant owned back in the bag, take my leave and just sell them?*

"After I treated our guest yesterday I just got a bit restless, so I went to work. It was not quite as satisfying as I hoped, but it did its job." She casually said, winking at me. Gav's face grimaced while she talked, but the moment Alis turned back to him he put his smile back on his face.

It took a moment to fully understand what Alis was implying, and the moment I realized it I felt a shiver down my back, instantly trying to escape her upstairs before she would focus on me again like yesterday with that *restlessness* of hers. "If only he was a girl..." she sighed on the floor below me. "I am a boy!" I shouted partly out of reflex, going back into my room.

The stuff I carelessly put on the ground was easy to put back, I finished packing up in just a minute. Throwing the bag over my shoulder I went downstairs, wanting to leave.

"Oh, you are going outside?" Alis asked me, slurping something from a cup.

"I just thought I would sell that weapon somewhere and try to find some work. As anything *but* a prostitute." I answered her without turning around.

"Oh?" A voice to my side wondered. Gav had appeared next to me out of nowhere.

"So where do you think you can sell a weapon? Did you find a good spot? Or did your memory return to you?" He asked, a vicious smile on his head. Seeing my confusion he did not even wait for my answer before continuing.

"And where do you want to work? Did you find an apprenticeship somewhere? Or do you want to go to the orphanage?" Alis asked behind me.

"I will *never* go to the orphanage!" I said in a low voice, staring at them.

"Then you should become a prostitute, because there will be no other way for you." His smile grew bigger and more nasty, provoking me.

"What do you mean by that? Do you think I am too stupid to do anything else? Or is it because my body is now that of a- *woman*?" I wanted to ask, stopping myself at the last moment.

"Or is it because you also think I am worthless?" I corrected myself.

"No, I do not think that. It is just that this is not how our stupid society works." he replied, chuckling. "I do not know everything you did or learned before coming here, but you can only get a job if you take an apprenticeship from a certain age on, tying



you to that kind of work for the rest of your life. And even if you would have had something like that, now that you lost your memories that way will be closed forever for you unless you regain them.”

“What?” I gasped, the bag I just held dropping from my hand. “What kind of screwed system is that supposed to be?” I asked him, suddenly understanding why everyone said they could not teach me yesterday.

*This has to be some kind of bad joke, right?*

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We sat together at the table, my plan to go my own way put on hold for now.

“Please answer my questions about this world and this society. There are some things I want to know before we discuss anything further.” I said, looking serious at the two people before me.

“Is there a skill system or anything like that in this world? Or even special abilities?” I stated my first question, my face completely straight.

“Huh? You got completely serious for a moment and then you ask something stupid like this? Of course there is none of these!” Gav shouted at me, putting a hand to his temple.

“This is a very serious question for me! In my past world there were a lot of stories taking place in other worlds and most of the time there were things like that!” I shouted back, slamming my hand on the table. Alis and Gav shot each other a weird glance, but I ignored them.

“The next question: you talked about magic before. How does it work? Can anyone do this? And if yes, why did I not see any before?”

“Magic? I think it did exist...” Alis murmured, putting a finger to her chin.

“They say that there were still a few magicians around a hundred years ago, but after the war and the plague following it they all died out.” Gav explained, sounding exhausted.

“To be honest, I do not think it ever existed in the first place. I got to admit, that stone that I used to save your life did *look* like something magical, but I would rather guess that it might be just some sort of technology that was lost over times.”

That meant that if there had been any magic in this world, I was here far too late and it was almost completely lost. *What a shame...*

I slumped my shoulders. “And what about an adventure guild or something like that? I wanted to join one if there was any. Do they exist?”

“If you actually plan to join the guild I will kill you on the spot.” Gav answered indifferently without even batting an eye.

“Gav! Please do it outside at least, cleaning up blood in here is always so messy.” Alis chimed in, scolding him.

“That is *not* the problem with his statement!” I shouted, slamming my hand on the table again.

“I was joking, honey.” Alis chuckled. “He would never do it *inside* our house.”

“*That* was the part you joked about?!” I shouted again.

“Yes.” Alis waved her hand. “But since you forgot I will explain it to you. This *adventure guild* you talked about is probably something equal to what the guild would have offered thirty years ago. The *Guild guild* to be exact. But the *Guild* is our enemy, so we would you rather not join them.” Alis continued without reacting to my rebuttal.

I shook my head. “Sorry, I could not follow that. *Guild Guild*? What the hell is that supposed to be?”

Gav answered for Alis: “The very reason you can not work anywhere without any apprenticeship is because every branch of work is guided by its own guild. They were created from worker unions in the past, wanting better working conditions from their bosses, and the bosses wanting to guarantee no one else would sell better products for lower prices to undercut them and create a monopoly. That led to guilds in this country being founded one after another and soon everything that is something that can be produced or could be classified as a field of work has its own guild ensuring good working conditions and quality control as well.”

Alis continued now for him. “But with guilds everywhere, it got messy. They would fight between each other, invade the others market space or clash because of moral reasons. That is when one of the Kings went in and created a special guild to guide the guilds. And since every other guild would be called the field they are representing followed by *guild*, so lets say *farmer guild* as example, that would make this big guild the *Guild Guild*, or in short, just *the* guild.”

*Wow, I did not expect this conversation to turn into a history lesson. I just wanted to know if I can register as an adventurer. Also I always sucked at history...*

Keeping my thoughts to myself I continued to listen, ignoring the dizzy feeling in my head.

“And, for quite some years, *the* guild employed mercenaries with loose contracts to hunt monsters or escort the merchants or their wares, really all kinds of odd jobs. But after the union of the continent took place almost a century ago the monsters were almost completely eradicated, mercenaries mostly outlawed and the knight force patrolling the streets doubled. That resulted in the routes getting safer and the work for those that still continued living this way swindled day by day until that service was finally just put down.” Alis finished the explanation.

*Ah. Wow. I was actually reincarnated into a world of swords and fantasy, with monster girls and what not, but I am actually too late for everything that gave that world its charm like the magic or adventurer part. What a waste.*

"I see..." I muttered, feeling all the strength I had left draining from my body. Maybe it was because I had not eaten anything since I met that old fart till now, or maybe it was the overwhelming despair of being too late in this world for everything that made a fantasy world appealing in the first place.

With my vision suddenly turning black the last thing I saw was the table coming closer followed by darkness. *I beg of you!*

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When I opened my eyes again, I was lying on the bed in the room I had spent the night in. "Did you wake up, honey?" Alis asked me, sitting next to my bed. I nodded and tried to stand up, only to be held down by her.

"You should get some food first. I already thought you had looked paler than usual. Maybe you lost too much blood after being shot?" She pressed a plate with grilled carrots into my hands. "They say that carrots are good for your eyes. And after I tried looking through your glasses I was shocked how bad they must be, honey."

Wordlessly I took the plate, forcing myself to eat some.

After a moment of awkward silence I spoke up. "They are not even strong enough, but the pair I would have actually needed had cost twice as much, and I did not want to steal *those* from the owner..." I muttered after gulping down another carrot. "So you are a thief with a heart?" She laughed.

"Well, *I* did not rob a bank to destroy the economy." I countered, trying to get myself to eat the next carrot. Alis took advantage of me being defenseless and shuffled through my hair, much to my dismay.

"Gav complained to me that you left the bathtub dirty with that black ink sticking everywhere. He was quite mad at you."

*I kind of forgot about it since he saw me naked, okay?*

"I am sorry..." I muttered, finally forcing myself to eat the next carrot. She giggled at my apology. "He might be very strict and cold to everyone, but please do not hate him for that. He is only being like this to protect himself and those close to him."

She stole a carrot from my plate and took a bite of it, forcing the rest of it into my mouth without mercy. "The way you eat seems so cute. If only you were a girl..." she muttered, her face blushing at me chewing on the carrot with disgust showing on my face. *What the hell is wrong with this woman?* "I am a boy!" I protested after I finally gulped the food down, backing away from her.

"The only thing you are is a little brat!" a voice screamed from the outside.

Alis giggled again, continuing to go with her hand through my hair. “Anyway, I talked with him after he threw you on the bed.” *He threw me on the bed?! He did not even lay me down carefully, he just dumped me here?*

“I must agree that you are a liability to us since you know so much, so it would be better for us for you to either... *disappear...* or to stay with us.”

*Am I in danger? They will not kill me while I sleep, right? Or just sell me?*

“But he knows that I like your bod- boding personality. So we tend to let you stay with us. But be aware that this is only temporary possible. You will have to find another way to survive without us or recover your memories.”

I nodded, but thinking about the whole situation just made me want to give up on the spot. “Where would I even start? After what you told me, I could not even work if my life depended on it, which it actually does. And if I do not want to sell my body, what is left? Living as a criminal?”

“You could join the orphanage, and if you do that the faster you do so the better.”

She suggested, a smile on her face.

“*Why? Why is everyone suggesting that? Do you all hate me?*” I asked, grimacing at this suggestion. I was sick of it.

“Why would we hate you to suggest it? And why are you so against it in the first place, anyway?” Alis asked, tilting her head.

“Why wouldn’t I be against it? Be surrounded by kids again? All of them hating me because I am not like them, letting them pick on me, call me names and steal my stuff? The teachers powerless and my parents making everything worse when they try to help by threatening those other kids? Hell no, I will never enter some place like that ever again!”

Tears were forming in my eyes only thinking about those times. The constant discussions with my parents and the bullying at school had left its scars. No way I would want to return to being treated like a kid again! I won’t go back to being treated like everyone else would know what would be best for me!

Yet Alis looked at me disturbed from what I said. “Why would you think it would be like this? Your name is perfectly fine.”

“I know it will be like this! Just look at my hair! My eyes! My skin! I got a sunburn from the sun in winter! My eyes look weird, my hair is like that of an old person! How would that not become a target for other kids looking for something to pick on? And the way I am clueless about society combined with my mental age and the way I look, what do you think would happen? That they welcome me with open arms when I am just an adult in a kids body?”

“You do not really seem like an adult to me, though...” Alis answered, her voice sounding a bit sad.

“I agree with both of you there.” A voice behind Alis said. At some point Gav had

entered the room, still wearing the apron from before. "You really do not seem like an adult the way you behave. But also I can not really dismiss that you could very well be a target for other kids. Even if you think that might not be true, Alis."

"But I think the orphanage is still a really nice place. It is the one thing that our queen and government is good for, even if they ruin everything else. And you know that, Gav, we have both been there!" Alis said to him, pleadingly.

He nodded. "We have been there, yes. But I protected you in there so you never had to see any of the problems. Children can be very cruel and the Mamas could not be everywhere at once."

Alis clapped her hand before her chest, looking up to him. "You had been protecting me even then? Oh, how I love you, Gav!" She shouted, jumping into a hug with him, plastering kisses on his cheeks. He shoved her away with an annoyed face, but he could not hide his slight blush. "Sorry, I could not resist." She said to him, giving him an meaningful wink, to which he just made a pukiing sound.

"...What is even that relationship between you?" I asked them, trying to comprehend what I was witnessing.

"Family." said Gav while Alis was shouting "Lovers!", only to be chopped on the head from him. "And we are *not* lovers or even in that kind of relationship at all." He added, glaring at Alis, who was pouting at that. "But I do love you!"

Gav sighed. "I know you love me as family. So please stop giving everyone else always the wrong idea." Alis shot him an evil grin. "But that is the fun part!" Gav gave her another chop on her head, dragging her out of the room once again.

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The next day Gav was so kind to even include a portion for me when he made breakfast. I thought he might feel bad for throwing me on the bed yesterday when I had passed out, but instead he made me clean up my mess in the bathtub first and after that he ordered me to go shopping with him.

Before we left he mustered my clothes and the places where I had a sunburn, only to leave me standing for a moment before he returned with a big scarf, a cap and a pair of gloves, telling me to put them on. Together we went outside, him leading the way.

"You know..." he started after a while. "I understand why you do not want to go to the orphanage. I protected Alis from everything that I could, but we still both ended up here." He made a wide arc with his arm, covering the many adult clubs and stores on the street. "She says she wants to do this and that it's fun for her, but it still hurts me a little every time. The two of us had been in a similar position like you before." "You were?" *Then you could probably be a bit nicer to me, I guess.*

He nodded, but did not say anything further until we arrived at a shop selling clothes. "So, what kind of clothes do you want now?" He asked me while strolling into the section with female clothes. "Male ones." I answered without hesitation.

"Really? You know I already saw your body? Or is it just your kink?"

I shook my head. "I have been a man in my past life. To suddenly start wearing female clothing is something I just can't get my heart over. It feels weird."

"But you insist that you are a *boy* all the time." he said with a deadpan expression.

"Well, I *am* a boy at heart!"

"And a girl in everything else. And?"

"What do you mean with that? Do you want to start a fight with me?" I scowled at him.

He started laughing. "No, I just wanted to understand what is going on in that head of yours. I mean, before the thing with your memories and that weird tale with you coming from another world, you also did dress up as a boy and behaved as such. More than you do now even."

"Are you saying you don't believe me?"

"No. Well, yes, actually I don't believe you. While most of your personality changed, some core things still stayed the same. How could I not question that fairy tale of yours?"

I grumbled, there was nothing I could argue against. I did not know how the previous owner had behaved and my story really must sound unbelievable.

"Anyway, if you want to buy clothes for me, please purchase male ones. If you do not, I fear that Alis will lose control." I finally said.

Smiling knowingly at my words he thankfully went to the section for men.

He started picking out clothes for me, letting me try them out. At first I was shocked at how close the quality was to what I had known from my old world, but hey, it was better than constantly wearing something that would seem like medieval costumes or rags like I had expected in a medieval fantasy world.

After I had been playing a dress up doll for Gav for some time he said he wanted to get something, only to return with white... *panties*. I gave him an very displeased look, but he insisted, saying I would need them at *that* time of the month since they were easy to wash.

I grimaced at the thought that this might also happen to me, but having no experience with it I had to trust him and reluctantly accepted them. The moment I took them he gave me a wide grin. *Wait, was he messing with me?*

Still looking displeased I put them to the rest of the clothes he had picked out for me. At least the outfits he chose for me looked surprisingly stylish, even if most of them were cheap. He certainly had good taste if nothing else.

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Just when we were about to pay for the clothes, we could hear another customer chatting. "Did you hear? There will be an open ball next month at the royal palace. They say even the queen will be present." the cashier said, glancing toward the side where expensive suits were lined up. "Really? So everyone can enter?" the man asked, his mouth open. "Sure. They even gave out some flyers just yesterday. They say the queen will give a speech the first time after twenty years. Would be a shame not to go." The cashier assured the man. I could already see how he counted the money he might make in his head. And the customer, just like the man wanted, went back to get some suits for himself, deciding he wanted to attend.

Gav, who had also been listening to that conversation, pressed some banknotes in my hand and went to the cashier. "Excuse me. Do you have one of those flyers? I would also be interested in that."

The man smiled and got something from below his counter, giving Gav a printed piece of paper. "*Dance with the queen- open for all*" it said, showing a red curtain and a black theater mask lying on a red rose. On the corner there also was a small picture promoting VIP tickets.

Gav ordered me to pay with some bills he gave me and wait for him outside, leaving me and entering the woman section alone. Not sure if I would like what he planned I did as he told me.

*If the worth of those banknotes was linked to the amount of gold the bank had bunkered, how much damage did these two cause by stealing it? If the whole thing really was just getting swept under the rug despite their violent escape...*

Getting a headache from the danger those two posed not only to me, but also the people around me, I let out a big sigh and leaned against the shopping window.

"Ah, excuse me?" An elderly woman came to me, asking for my attention. "Hello youngster, I have some trouble here. Could you take care of it for me? Someone before tried to take care of it, but he failed to find." She asked me, a smile on her face.

"Uh, I guess? Depends on what it is." I answered, not sure if I could help. "Here, my darling. Please take care of it. That thing has been a real pain for us." she pulled out some paper and pressed it into my hands, disappearing into the crowd on the street the moment I looked down on it. Confused by her abrupt disappearance I glanced around, but she had already disappeared in the crowd. "But... I am a boy..." I muttered, unsure what just had happened.

With nothing else I could do I inspected the piece of paper she had pressed in my hands. "Janine Kroskow" it read, followed by some numbers. It did not look like a phone number and I was not sure that they even existed in this world yet.

Shrugging my shoulders I put the paper into my pocket, right next to the other note I had received from the old fart in the woods.

By the time Gav came out of the store I had already forgotten about it and together we continued the shopping trip, buying groceries next.

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On the way back I was forced to carry multiple shopping bags, balancing them with my arms. "You are a boy, right? Then you surely can carry all of this home." Gav said while laughing when he shove all the bags to me, only carrying the small bag he had bought at the clothing store when I was outside, looking pleased with himself.

The shopping trip itself had been quite some adventure for me. Never I would have had considered how it feels to buy meat from a girl with the lower half of a spider, eight eyes, two long fangs over her mouth and her arms covered in black and hairy chitin. Or buying fish from a man that had cat ears, a cat tail, whiskers and even the rear legs of a cat with long claws instead of fingernails he could retract. You would never question something like this in RPGs or in movies, but seeing it in real life did prove to be quite a experience.

I glanced at Gav, seeing the flyer from before still sticking out from his pocket. "Is this place ruled by a monarchy?" I asked him. In RPGs that had been a standard trope in fantasy worlds, also the title of the event kind of implied it.

Gav shook his head. "No, this country is ruled under a democracy with each district in a council that decides the laws. Only that the titles of those officials in our democracy guild are passed down the same family line since its founding a hundred years ago."

He glanced at me and noticed that I was staring at the poster in his pocket. "The queen, Olivia Rothwin, is the overall head of this democracy, followed next by the leader of the guild, Theodore Westground. The queen is something like a last instance- only if she says a law may pass, it actually passes. That would be the way it was supposed to be. But as far as we know it she is actually just a puppet controlled by the guildmaster." *So the democracy in this country has still strong signs of the monarchy left in the way it is ruled.*

"Why do you think that the queen is just a puppet?" I asked curiously.

"They call her the immortal queen, saying that she has been alive for over 250 years and that nothing can kill her. But that is obviously a lie." Gav laughed sarcastically.

"No human can survive that long and everyone can be killed." He said, frowning his brow. Gav seemed kind of angry, saying all of this, but this time not at me.

"She is obviously just a puppet figure, created hundred years ago to sway the masses and to ensure that everything is going exactly like the guild is willing it. *Total*



*control* over everything, rendering the votes from the other districts pointless. Everything is just going as the guild wants it, no matter what other districts want. They control the world.”

I nodded. Thinking that someone would live that long did seem like a fat lie. *But...*

“From what I have learned about this world so far I would not be that surprised if someone really would be immortal.” I wondered out loud.

“No, it should be impossible that someone lives that long, even with magic. That stone might have brought you back from the dead, but they are only two left and they are in our possession now. And if there would be a way for her to be immortal, why was no one else in her family? Why did no one before her achieve this? Because it *obviously* is just a lie. Maybe she got older than most people, earning her the name. But even then, over two hundred years is *too* long.”

I nodded, trying to balance the whole heap of bags he had shoved on me without falling down.

*Seems like there are no long living species in this world, or else he would have guessed she would be one of them. Only humans and demi humans exist in this world, I guess.*

“And they never show her face. The last time she was seen without a veil covering her face was right after the world war. Considering how all the leaders of the nations around the world had died from the plague she also should have died around that time. Someone must have taken her place after her death for the fame she had and started working with it. Spreading the guild system to every other nation that was about to collapse after everyone high ranked had died from the plague, making them dependent on Harkur, the district we are in right now. It had already been the biggest nation at that point in time with the military and economy to support it. And after the other countries were too dependent on the guild being lead by Harkur’s guild to leave they unified the continent using the queen as a figurehead. A puppet with no face, beloved by the masses for her status and name alone, controlling the whole continent.”

“The whole continent is one big nation?” I asked, wondering. In my old world there had been a nation that had taken the leading role of the world after the cold war, but even then, to peacefully take over everyone in one go was no small feat.

“Yes, the United Nations. The second time in history that it exists, but the first time for it to be stable.” He nodded, putting a bag that had been about to fall from my hand to its place again.

“And those united nations also control the continent to the south, even if *officially* they are separated. They have no central government, so you can guess who is leading them. The united nations, of course.”

*So there were only two continents in this world. I was currently on the northern con-*

*inent in the city called Krahenfels. This city is located in the district Harkur, the nation in which the guild had been founded. And Harkur had united the world using the guild, creating the united nations consisting of the districts that once had been nations. I think I get it now.*

“And there is the fact that they slowly take away every point where humans connect and discuss. With the ban of any alcohol outside of medicine they closed off the most popular meeting points in which even the guild itself had been founded first. A plan to censor books is on the way, letters between people are being controlled to ensure *our safety* and even the theaters are fearing a ban of controversial works while you never see anything bad involving the guild in the newspapers. And then there is the guild system itself! It’s forcing people to stay within their profession only, blocking the widespread share of knowledge. And if that wouldn’t be bad enough, people like you and me who won’t fit or have disabilities just get pushed into either prostitution or crime, while the latter is even punished by death. This system should be destroyed!” He continued rambling.

*Did he just say death? Was he just casually saying that I could be put on death sentence for helping them escape?*

Gav did not seem to notice me gaping at him, talking further.

“And the next target, according to the agents I have in the guild, is the red light district, with the goal to ban prostitution as a whole and shut down the prostitution guild. That is the only place where people who did not get into the system were able to live, practically forcing them to sell their bodies. But now they want to take it away, not leaving an alternative. What will happen to those that cannot continue their original line of work after, say, getting ill? They all will end up with having to turn to crime, fanning the black market even more that cropped up right after the ban on alcohol, selling stuff that can make you go blind or kill you from one sip.”

He gritted his teeth. “It is just like they want to turn us all into puppets, only able to do as the state wants while filling their own pockets at the top. How could I not fight against that? And we are not alone in this.”

By now we were already back in the pleasure district, not far from their home.

“Is that the reason why you guys robbed the bank? To destroy the worth of the currency and cause a revolt to destroy the system?” I asked him, trying to be sure I understood it right.

He nodded after hesitating for a bit. “That is what we should have done after you got shot, but that had only been the spare plan. I never thought my original plan would go so haywire with you... becoming like *this*. I did not want to cause too much damage, so we planned for you to get close to the queen and...” He sighed. “I should have listened to Alis. I wanted to go all in and got greedy, but it turns out that she had been right once again. I really should have listened to her this time.”

Gav scratched the bag of his head, ignoring the shopping bag that almost fell down from my arms. “Anyway, we will destroy this system one way or the other, no matter what it takes. It can't be forgiven for what it forces the people on the bottom of the ladder.”

Smiling sincerely he patted me on the back with force, causing the bag I just had stabilized carefully to almost fall off again. “And I am willing to use and kill everything and anyone to reach that goal, even if it is some weird kid that claims to be from another world.”

*What have I gotten myself into? Those two definitely were dangerous!*

*But I am already caught in their fangs. Them threatening to kill me never had been a joke. And it had been already too late to turn my back to them the moment I woke up in this world.*

“Oh, you are back!” Alis shouted from the top floor, coming down and hugging Gav. “Did you bring something for your adorable sister?” She asked him with a sweet voice. He answered with grabbing a bag from my hands filled with sweets and handing it to her, only to end up defending himself from an assault of kisses on his cheek.

*If I would betray them or they think I may hinder their plans... they would kill me instantly. The only option is to nod my head to everything they say and hoping they won't get rid of me for some stupid mistake.*

“What is wrong, Shima? Get your ass moving and stop staring at us.” He sounded annoyed and gave me an angry look while pushing Alis away from him.

“Y-Yes sir!” I shouted, running to the kitchen with the bags, only to trip on the way over my own feet and spill the contents on the floor. “Idiot! Useless brat!” He screamed at me.

*I am absolutely gonna die!*

#### **4: The Princess, The Queen And The Immortal**

Today had been the kind of day where the weather just did not want to reflect our feelings. Despite the heavy mood in the room, the sun outside was shining, almost as if it was saying that everything was going to be alright.

I clenched my right hand, currently held by my man, King Markus Julius Rothwin, still only 44 years old, seven years older than me. He had aged quite a bit, his blond hair having already turned white on a few spots, wrinkles were on his stern face that had been so handsome and youthful before. Next to me stood our daughter, Ailene. She was 24 years old, and in a few years she would be crowned the queen of Krahenfels.

with Julius retiring. When she was young she had the same hair color as her father and her face was similar to my own, but over the time her hair turned almost as black as my hair, leaving no trace of Julius inheritance. He had been complaining about that quite a lot, and even his second wife often teased him about it.

“There... really is almost no... similarity between the two of you.” the second wife joked, trying to tease Julius like usual. This time he only nodded. “I know.” He said. “I still love you, father.” Ailene interjected, forcing a smile on her face. Julius returned her smile for a second before looking back, his face again showing the sadness and regret he felt.

Seeing the second wife of his on her deathbed before us was hard on all of us, especially for Julius, who still was blaming himself for a lot of things that had happened.

The woman before us was a Naga, half human and half snake. She was the very hero of Krahenfels, who had been praised as the battle god and the saint that created the possibility for humans and her kind to live together. The very one that proved that humanoid monsters were not monsters, forming our kingdom into the very first of its kind that lived together with them. That very Naga had been the second wife to my man, Julius, the king of Krahenfels, and also she was my friend, a person I loved and the person who single handedly saved my life, enabling me to see my daughter grow up. That woman was *Shaha Rothwin*.

But unlike us humans, humanoid monsters had a shorter life span. While we were able to reach up to 60 years if we were lucky, their life span was only half as long. And last spring she turned 29, her body growing weaker and older by the day. It was painful to watch, knowing that each day she was rapidly approaching her death. Yet she was always smiling and joking, telling us how much she had enjoyed her life, telling us not to worry about her, letting us promise that we would live on without her and that we always would protect the humanoid monsters.

“Julius...” she said, her voice weak. “Yes, dear?” Julius answered, his free hand softly caressing her cheek. “Please... I still see you... despairing over... what you did in the past. Please... let it go. I have... already forgiven you... a long time ago.” Shaha said to him, smiling. “I know...” he said, a strained smile on his face. But I could feel his hand shaking. I clenched it, showing him that he was not alone.

“Ailene...” she said next, looking at my daughter. “I know... you will be a... great leader. But please... show mercy to your mom. She really loves you.”

“I know!” Ailene almost screamed, her eyes turning red, but she held her tears back. We had fought often after she reached puberty, and when she had called me a child and stopped listening to anything I would say to her, stating that I could never be her mother and that I still was only a child myself in a fit of rage... it had really broken my heart and we never really connected after that. She had apologized

later, but those words had stuck with me. Mostly because I feared that she was right about it. I always had been very childish and thickheaded, so much so that even this whole situation had been only possible because of the mistakes I had made and the hands I had forced.

“Good. ...Ailene. Please... look out for her... she gets lonely... easily.”

Ailene nodded, laying her hand on my head. She had grown taller than me already when she had just been fourteen years old.

“And... Princess?” Shaha said, looking at me now. “Yes, my lovely pet?” I said, forcing a smile despite the pain in my chest on my face, playing along with her using nicknames. “Please... call for Ade... if you ever... have a problem.”

Now my hand started shaking. I looked at Julius, pleading with my eyes for his help, but he only shook his head.

“I know... I cursed him a lot. ...But ... without him... I would have never... met you all...” Her voice grew weaker now, but she still managed a laugh. “In... my old world... I already had been...” She made a pause, trying to catch her breath. I took her hand and squeezed it, feeling how cold it had become, but she returned the squeeze.

It was rare for her to open up about her past, and even then she only told us pieces.

“After all... this time... I have... to thank him... the time... with you... Olivia... Julius... had been a... happy one...” she said, smiling at us. But now she started to look at the ceiling, ignoring us, her usual bright smile still on her face. “I... will... meet... him... one last... time...”

With that she closed her eyes, the hand I was holding starting to feel lifeless, even if her smile never faded from her face.

Scholar Godwin, our court doctor, took a step forward and took her pulse. After a long pause, he shook his head. “I am sorry.” he said, the mood growing even heavier. The only sound in the room was now the chirping of the birds coming from the open window.

After saying our last words to her, we turned around, leaving the room. Outside were the two kids that Shaha had adopted after she transformed the old keep in the middle of the city into an orphanage. They had spoken with her before us, just like Shaha had requested. Both of them were pale, they knew from our looks that she had passed on. “Our hero from another world...” I whispered, still wearing my forced smile. I wanted to cry, but the tears refused to come. “With her last will to say that I should contact Ade...” I let out a sarcastic laugh, trying to understand why she would even say that.

Julius took me into his arms, hugging me, stronger than usual. It felt warm, like my own personal safe space. The very place that I never wanted to lose, just as much as I never had wanted to lose Shaha. Only now I could finally let the tears come out.

I felt scared. Fear of also losing him grabbed my heart. "I am here, and I will stay at your side. I promise." Julius whispered, his hand going through my hair. "Yes..." I whispered back, hugging him back as strong as I could.

Our daughter was standing next to us. She had already started crying some time ago, but tried to hide it. Her face really did resemble my own so very much. *Shaha had been right*, I thought. *She just looks exactly like me.*

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Two weeks after living together with Alis and Gav, having realized that I was living together with some quite dangerous people, my daily life was... surprisingly peaceful. Gav ordered me to help with the chores around the house, help him cook and go shopping, but in the time between I had a lot of free time to kill. At first I tried to use the crossbow to see if I could even use it, but just when I wanted to start Alis lectured me about it. Not about me *using* it, but rather that I should neither be seen with a weapon outside nor use it inside where I could destroy their home, leaving me with no place to use it at all.

After that I started to question why everyone I had seen was even using crossbows in the first place.

"Do you guys know what guns are?" I asked them at dinner, thinking they would just say no. But both of them nodded, to my surprise.

"Really? Guns? The one you shoot with black powder, that make a *bang* and everything? And even the type that can be reloaded much quicker than any crossbow?"

Both nodded again.

"Then why the hell is everyone using crossbows in this world?!" I shouted, not getting it at all. If this world had guns, why wouldn't they use it?

Alis, who was still wearing her outfit from work, a nearly see through silk dress under which I could clearly discern the lines of her underwear, was the one to answer me. "Because every bit of black powder is controlled by the state, and even the attempt at building something like a gun that is controlled by ignition or the like is getting you the death sentence. And, unlike their attempts to shut down the black market with drugs, they actually are really good at disrupting every try to obtain, build or use them. Even the armies do not possess any guns, thus everyone relies on the next thing- that is the crossbow, or sometimes the bow. A few do appear sometimes, though."

*Huh? Did someone else tell them about how crazy our world got after they invented guns? Maybe I wasn't the only one reincarnated into this world. Oh boy, I sure I hope I can meet one day someone from my old world. Maybe I am not the only one here!*

After dinner I tried to think of ways to entertain myself in the time I had gotten for myself. I was not that much a fan of reading and computers or consoles did not exist yet in this world. Also Gav, who seemed to love ordering me around, had been going out with Alis every evening now, leaving me behind. I was bored to death, even with the whole situation with the new world. But after I found an old chess board, I had an idea.

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I was sitting on a chair outside a strip club. Alis told me that this was one of the locations they personally owned on this street. After asking one of the staff members if I could have a two chairs and a table for usage outside while dropping Alis name, they actually helped me to set it up the moment I mentioned her.

Now I sat on the main street in the red light district, a chess board before me, all pieces on their respective places. And to complete the picture I had put up a little sign saying "Play with me".

Some dudes who misunderstood that, or at least wanted to misunderstand that, tried to pick me up or get us a room, and most of them did not even change their mind after I told them I was the opposite gender of what they thought, only in the end to get dragged away by some muscular men that were half naked.

What did surprise me was the fact that the first players that challenged me were the girls selling their bodies on the street, wanting to take a break from trying to pick up men or just had a customer and wanted to calm down.

Most of them were curious at first if I was fresh flesh or a new *queen of the district*, whatever the hell that was supposed to be, but after I told them that I was living nearby and just wanted to pass time they accepted me very quickly.

Some of them told me about their last customer, some of them flirted with me, others complained about the stupid things they had to do or the ugly things they had seen. I wasn't prudish, but I found myself getting red a lot of times. Especially the demi humans had a lot of ... *special*... requests from their customers.

After a few days the half also the half naked muscular men standing outside in the cold started to challenge me. They had been watching from the side at first and I was scared that they would shoo me away or scold me, but after I played with a few of them I learned that they also were prostitutes. And, much to my surprise, under the leadership from Gav, even if Alis was their boss!

And boy, did they give me nice intelligence on him. Like that he was freeloading on Alis. Or that he was the leader in a sense that they would listen to him, but that he did not earn anything and was just pursuing it out of his own interests. And, to my surprise, someone recognized me as the guy with Alis and Gav on the truck. He said

I was wearing the same clothes today, so that had given me away, but still that was an impressive feat considering how my hair and the color of my eyes changed.

After the third week I was once again sitting outside with the chess board, challenging anyone who was willing to a game. Most of the times I did lose, but in the last week I got better and even won a few games now and then.

A woman sat down without asking. I had never seen her before, her brown hair was tied to a pony, a woollen cap on her head. She wore a black mantle with big buttons and a big handbag around her shoulders. Nervously her eyes darted around, as if she was looking for someone constantly in the crowd around her.

"Hello. Do you want black or white?" I asked her. A lot of suspicious looking persons were coming and going in this part of the city, but most of them only looked the part. Most of them had been really nice to me.

"White." The woman said, spinning the board so she had white on her side.

She made her first move, I followed.

"I see you sitting here and playing with people a lot of times these days." She said, no emotions in her voice. *I never noticed her before, though.*

"I have time to kill. And since I have no games I can play by myself, I use this." I said, pointing at the board.

She made her next move using the knight. I moved a pawn.

"Do you remember the faces you played with?" she asked me, staring at the board. I shrugged with my shoulders. "Depends. If you can describe them, I might remember if I played with them or not." *What am I, some kind of information broker?*

"How much do you want for that? Or is beating you in this game enough for you?" I started laughing out loud, trying to hold it back. "Sorry, sorry. I am happy about donations, but its not like you need to do anything to ask me." *She really did see me as an information broker! Maybe I should actually consider that as job for me.*

"I see. Too bad I still beat you now." The woman exclaimed, taking one of my pawns. "Checkmate." She exclaimed, trapping my king with her queen and knight. *That had been a short round.*

"Good game." I said, fearing she would want to shake my hand like the other opponents always wanted to after a game. Luckily she did not, she only continued mustering the crowd around her

"So, describe the person you are searching." I demanded. She looked around, and after she deemed it safe, her upper body leaned forward, closer to me, ignoring that I backed away a little unconsciously.

"I am looking for a black haired boy with blue eyes. His hair is on the longer side and he is a bit pale, his face quite girly. Name is Shara. Ever heard or seen him?" she asked, her eyes looking pleadingly at me.



*That description sounds kind of familiar, but i do not remember meeting anyone resembling that description or name.*

“Sorry, but I don’t think I have seen someone like this before, also the name does not ring any bells. Might I ask though why you are searching for him? Is he family of yours?”

“No, he is an assassin. I saw him, dressed up as a girl, killing my son and my husband when he thought he was alone. At that time I could not do anything but hide in the closet. Not anymore, though. I swear to Usamir I will find him and revenge my family.”

*Whoa, scary.*

She reached for something in her pocket and pressed a small business card in my hands. I tried to suppress twisting my mouth at her touch, and if she noticed it she seemed to ignore it. “If you ever see him, contact me. But be careful, that boy is quite dangerous. Even the assassins I interrogated were fearful of him and it took some time to find anything related to him at all. He never leaves any witnesses, making him hard to track.”

With that she stood up and left, not even saying goodbye. I glanced at the card she had given me. “Janine Kroskow” it said, her address below her name.

*That name seems strangely familiar. But that was probably just my imagination.*

## **5: Dance With Fate**

“You useless idiot! You spoiled brat! You waste of space! You lazy bum!”

Gav was shouting at me in my room, standing between me and the only exit outside. “What do you think you are doing? Eating our food without even asking in the middle of the night, not doing your part of the housework and also not even picking your hair out of the drain after you shower! And to top it all, the kitchen is a mess now after you cooked, and you just left it like this? Do you actually want me to lecture you? Are you trying to get on my bad side more than you already are? Or are you masochistic to the point you enjoy this kind of thing, you brainless dumbass?”

Well... I had to admit I did kind of go back into my old habits and grew a bit lazy... but jeez, was it really that bad that he had to shout at me like this?

I mean, he was not lying about those things. It is just that...

*It is not that bad, I swear!* I actually just did not get to do a part of the housework yesterday after a prostitute came here, bleeding and crying, saying that her customer

had beaten her. Alis took care of her wounds while Gav and I rushed out, searching that man so he could get his just desserts. Normally that would have been the responsibility of one of the guards on the main street, but well, some customers do enjoy fresh air if you catch my drift. And from the alley they had chosen this home was the one closest to her.

And the topic with the midnight snack... both Alis and Gav had been away from early morning till late into the night and cooking always had been Gav's job. So when they were not coming home and I grew hungry, I just took some vegetables and ate them raw. I mean, they cannot fault me for that, right?

Also I did pick up the white hair after I showered out of the drain, but considering I had to wear my glasses so I could even see anything and the tendency of glass to grow foggy in the bath together with my hair becoming invisible in the white tub, you could call my work sloppy. But still, it was the best I could do!

And after trying to cook for myself yesterday, after both of them had been gone the whole day *again*, I just kind of forgot about cleaning up after me.

But when I said as much to him, trying to explain myself, he just used the ultimate technique of every person who held authority:

"Stop with your excuses!"

*Yep. That is it. The ultimate sentence my ex, my parents and even my teachers had always used. A sentence dismissing every opinion, no matter if they are right or just, forcing everyone under you to obey and to listen to you.*

*And to fight back against this unjust treatment, this very tool he dared to use against me-*

I cowered before him, tears in my eyes, snot running from my nose, my hands on my head. "Please don't kill me! Please don't get rid of me! I am sorry, so please forgive me!"

"Why should I?" he continued to shout, slapping his hand against the wall. I shrieked, getting even smaller. "I am sorry!" I screamed again, not knowing what else I could do, just hoping he would stop screaming at me.

There was a long pause, but I did not dare to look up. When he finally broke it- "Shima." - he was using his normal voice, it being perfectly calm.

*Okay, I changed my mind. Please do not stop screaming, this is even worse!*

"Y-Y-Yes?" I shot out, nervously, still not looking up. "If you really want me to forgive you, wear this. You have ten minutes to come downstairs."

Something flew through the air and landed softly on my head, wrapping itself around my face. Confused I took the cloth from my head, but Gav was already gone, the door closed.

three minutes later I was coming out of my room, wearing the clothes he had thrown at me, just like he had requested.

“Did you really have to go so far to threaten him?” I heard Alis downstairs, speaking with Gav. “Sure, if I wouldn’t do that, he would never comply.”

*I knew it! It was a trap all along! I did nothing wrong!*

“No, you actually did something! Nothing I said was wrong and I would have lectured you anyway!” he shouted from downstairs.

*Crap, did I just say my thoughts out loud?* I shrieked, reflexively putting my hands over my head again for a moment.

Steeling my resolve I went downstairs, my face blushing. He had used foul tactics to get me to do this, but I had to admit that he was right. Had he not done it this way, I would never had put on this *thing*.

“J’adore!” Alis shouted upon seeing me in a language I did not understand, her face growing red and throwing her hands before her mouth. “It is wonderful! Magnificent! It is perfect!”

I took a step back. “I am still a boy...” I muttered, feeling my face grow hot. “I knew it would fit you.” Gav said, nodding at me. He seemed proud of the dress he had chosen for me. Probably this very dress was the thing he had bought when I left the clothe store before him, sending me away knowing that I would protest with every fiber of my being.

“The red dress is so wonderful! It is perfectly presenting your pale skin, and with some lipstick, your small lips would be shining! And if we use some makeup near your eyes, together with some eyeliner, and maybe if we do your eyelashes... no no, scratch the eyeliner! Or maybe...”

Alis, still red, continued to mumble to herself, following a very dangerous train of thought.

I looked down on my body. Thankfully I had a very small chest, and the dress Gav chose did not try to present them, unlike the kind Alis was wearing all the time.

*But my chest was too small for the upper part of the dress...*

“I think we need a stuffed bra for you.” Gav stated, mustering me.

“Don’t you dare!” I shouted back at him with burning cheek before turning to Alis, who was approaching me with her arms stretched out like she was stalking her prey.

“And I am *still* a boy!” I shouted at her, running the steps up again, escaping into my room. *And I definitely did not look at myself in the mirror, having almost the same reaction as Alis, I did not!*

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“Shima. We bought that dress for a reason.” Alis said, looking at me with a unusual serious expression. “You will attend the ball with us and you will have a very important mission.”

I waved my hand. "I am not a criminal. Please do not put me into life threatening situations! I will help you any way I can and do everything you want *except* becoming a criminal again!" I shouted, trying to back away. But Gav, who had positioned himself behind me, grabbed my arms and hold me in place.

"Well, you see... we are not rich, but we got food for you, gave you clothes, a room, took care of you and even learned to accept that you are a lazy parasite mooching off from us." he said, his voice sounding very happy for some reason.

"I would not call myself like that, but well, some part of what you said is true..." I answered him, trying to slightly dismiss the very last part of me mooching off.

"Sure, sure, whatever you say. But wouldn't you say you owe us *something*?" he continued, his voice sounding even more happy than before. My knees started shaking, but I could not escape from the two of them.

"Wouldn't me not telling anyone of your plans and just ignoring them while pretending you are living a normal life not be enough to pay my debts?" I asked him making puppy eyes, hoping I could weasel my way out.

Gav did not say anything, but Alis stepped forward, running her finger over my neck. "Such a nice neck... would be a shame if someone had to cut it in order to protect themselves. Especially if it's yours, at that." Her voice that normally was kind of soothing and seductive now sounded dangerous and menacing without losing its calm. My knees lost all their strength. Would it not be for Gav holding me, I would have fallen on the ground already. I knew that Alis was not a force to be reckoned with, but I never knew she could be that *persuasive*, since she always tried to hit on me.

"What do you want me to do?" I cried, tears forming in my eyes. *They had me, and they had me good. Going along with their request was my only way to survive.*

Alis took something out of her bag, carefully holding it with a tissue, a deadly smile on her face.

*Dear god, I know you already fulfilled one of my biggest wishes, even if it was in a kind of screwed way... but please, help me get out of this situation!*

\*\*\*

That something Alis had given me was now lying in my room on the table next to the bed, making me feel unwell every time I saw it.

I put my face into my hands, still scared of those two terrorists I was living with. When they showed their fangs like that it really hammered in how dangerous they were. And that request...

I let out a big sigh.

“Is that place free?” a voice asked me. I nodded, looking up again. Before me was an old man with gray hair, the next challenger that wanted to play chess against me.

*Wait, I know that man! That guy is the old fart from the forest!*

I wanted to stand up and thank him for his hospitality, but I remembered just in time that I did look like someone else now, not having that black hair anymore and my eyes being red now.

“Do you want to start?” I asked him, pointing at the chess board.

“You can start, I will follow.” He said, so I turned the board, taking the white side.

“Is this not a weird spot to set up such a game?” He asked while I moved my pawn.

“I get that question a lot. But until now I never had any problems, and most people are really nice.” He made his move, copying me. “Interesting. They also probably tell you a lot, I assume?”

I nodded, moving another pawn. He copied my move once again, mirroring my play perfectly. *Did he have some kind of strategy or did he just want to mess with me?*

“By what you told me I assume everything is going fine for you. That right?” he asked me, while I was still thinking about the next move. Only after I moved my knight I gave him an answer. “Well, I am kind of caught between a rock and a hard place, but I hope I will manage. It just takes some resolve to see some of my responsibilities to the end, especially those I got forced on me.”

The man nodded, still exactly copying my moves, the board looking like it had been mirrored. “And what about the other duties you have? Do you shun them, or do you still take care of them?”

*What a weird way to ask this. But well, if I had to guess what kind of answer he wanted...* “There are some things I had been neglecting.” Like finding some work, so I could escape from those two. Surely, there had to be *something* I could do beside prostitution and the orphanage. “But it seems kind of impossible for me right now.” I let out a big sigh. “I should give up on it. Everything else right now is already more than enough to fill my plate, and after that... I still have no clue. Maybe I should find some kind of work fitting for me, even if I do not know if that is even possible. But I would hope for some peaceful times, not having all those responsibilities forced on me, not having to think about the aftermath every action I take could have.” Even knowing that those two had already possibly destroyed the economic from the whole continent, and this just being a ticking time bomb, threatening to cause suffering on such a wide scale... that was still weighing on my mind. And with me being so close to them I felt the burden of a lot of lives on my shoulder, especially with their last request they had pushed on me.

“Is that so?” the man asked, a sad look on his face. He moved his queen, removing one of my pawns. “Check.”

I shrieked at that. Until now the only thing he was doing was mirroring every move, doing the exact same thing. But now he had done something I did not, threatening my king with one smooth move.

“So, did you maybe hear something about when the *withered tree* will be felled?” At that question I tilted my head, but I did not look up from the chessboard, still trying to find the best move I could make. *Wait, did he not ask me a similar question already the last time we met? Did he recognize me? Or is it just something that is basic knowledge in this world?*

“I am afraid I do not know anything about that. But if it is withered, it might be soon?” I said, trying to sound intelligent, which, well, did sound better in my head.

“I see. Checkmate.”

“What?!” I shrieked again. The man had completely outplayed me.

“I hope we can play again in the future. But I think that might get difficult.” he said, standing up. “And the glasses suit you. Still, I am surprised about it.” He added, taking out a smoke and putting it in his mouth. “Thank you...? And until next time, I guess. I will not lose like this again!” I said, pointing at the board, to which he nodded slowly before turning around and disappearing in the crowd.

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“Put your head over the sink, this is gonna get a bit messy.” Gav said, pressing my head even further down into the sink with his hand. “I am starting now, so close your eyes.”

His voice did not carry any mercy, and soon I felt something cold running down my head, black drops falling from my head into the sink. One of those drops came near my eyes, making me jump a bit since I did not close my eyes like Gav told me to. That earned me a kick against my calf. “I am sorry!” I shouted, closing my eyes and enduring his hands going through my hair.

“It would be easier for everyone if you learned to do something like this yourself in the future. And with that I actually mean the *near* future.”

“Yes, sir!” I shouted.

Right now he was dying my hair with the black ink that I had in it when I woke up in this body. It was so I could attend the ball without being recognized after I fulfilled their request. “But do I really need to wear the contact lenses? I hate them! I can’t touch my own eyes, it’s just too scary!” I pleaded with him, hoping he would have mercy.

“Of course you have to wear them, idiot.” he shouted, rubbing my head even harder. “Just changing your hair color is not enough. And if you cant put them in yourself, I will *gladly* do it for you.”

“Eep!” I screamed, already imagining his evil smile while he was forcing my eyes open, his fingers slowly-

“Eeep!” I shouted again at that imagination playing in my head, shaking while doing so, which earned me another kick into my calf. “Stop moving, idiot.”

“Yes, sir! And I will gladly put the contact lenses in myself, sir!”

“I sure hope so...” Gav muttered, sounding utterly exhausted.

*Was dying my hair really that stressful?*

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I was standing in my room, mustering my eyes. After a big fight against myself I finally won against my instincts and put the contact lenses in, now checking them if they were sitting in the right place. Gav was with me in the room, for some reason he was preparing *two* dresses on my bed, checking them both over.

I put my classes on and inspected my face in the mirror. Black hair, blue eyes, a feminine face and hair that was a bit on the long side, reaching a bit over my neck and covering my ears.

*Wasn't there someone looking for a person like that...?*

I recalled the woman I met some time ago that I played chess with. She had described a person looking just like I did with my disguise. But if I did remember correctly, that person had another name. *Shara* or something like that, I think.

Curiously I went to my night table on which a *very* dangerous thing covered in tissues was lying. The very *thing* that was robbing me currently of my good sleep. But for now I tried to ignore it and instead opened the upper drawer, taking out the pieces of paper I had gotten over the past month.

There was the paper from the old fart with, what I learned recently, were Nagas shaping an X. Not knowing what it meant I put it back and took the next piece of paper, the one that the young woman had given me.

“Janine Kroskow” it said, also giving me her address.

The last note was from the old woman that had spoken to me when I was waiting for Gav before the store. It had a name on it and some random numbers. But when I read the name written on it, I went pale for a moment.

“Janine Kroskow” the paper from the old woman said.

“Gav? Is Janine Kroskow a name that does appear often around here?” I asked him without turning around. “I don’t know, but I think not.” he said, not showing any interest in pursuing that topic further.

“*You see, I have some trouble here. Could you take care of it for us?*” the woman who had given me that paper told me. Considering the choice of words and my slim build in this body, she surely did not mean for me to threaten me.

And well, considering that she had specifically targeted me in a crowd, giving me a name with some numbers on it...

*So, the only way left to interpret what she said I can think of...*

"Say, Gav. After we met the first two times since I woke up you mentioned some kind of contract. What kind of contact had that been?" I asked him, still not turning around.

"Where does that question come from? Also do not bother about it, the plan is already down the gutter since *someone* had decided to just lose their memory at the most crucial part."

I sighed at his snide remark. "Could it have been that I should have killed the queen?" I asked him, deciding to try my luck.

"Did you finally remember something? Yes, the contract said that we would rob the bank, and while we bury the gold somewhere you get yourself arrested for a crime that officially never happened, get locked away in a special prison that officially does not exist in the guild headquarter where also the main residence of the queen is. And you would just *happen* to wander in her room, where you would find the current queen puppet of Krahenfels. The being that so many people believe in, the very symbol of every political decision being made. And then you assassinate her while we make the whole incident public, destroying the trust in the guild completely, opening us all the doors to destroy the system."

"The same outcome from the *request* you want me to fulfill." I nodded, putting my hand to my temple. "Say, could it be that the former inhabitant of this body had been an assassin?" I continued to ask him.

"Yes. And, according to Alis memories and the people who we contacted you through, one of the best of your trade. That was why we hired you."

I groaned.

*Of course it had to be like this. No, it was not enough that I had to wake up next to terrorists and have a body I cant even expose to sunlight without getting burned, no, I also just happen to be thrown into the body of an assassin. A well known, at that. Just how unlucky could I get?*

*But let me also lay out the implications of this information. Until now I had always thought that helping robbers fleeing a bank was the worst thing I had done until now, having only feared that.*

*But I had never spared a thought about the things before that. Did the former body help in robbing the bank? I never asked, I never thought about it, I never even tried to think about it. And why? Because I was scared about the answer.*

But now I was *forced* to think about it. Now I *knew* that with my white hair and red eyes people in the know *did* recognize me as an assassin, and one of them had given me something that seemed like a job. A job I had completely ignored. That



might have consequences, but I could not tell which ones yet.

But there is *still* more!

If the name on the paper is a target I have to kill, that would mean I already met the very target I should kill. And this very target is also targeting me!

*“He killed my son and my husband”* the young woman had said, and then she added she was seeking revenge. And the person she described just happened to look similar to me, even if she had a wrong name. I was sure she meant me.

*So there could be consequences for not fulfilling a job given to me, a scary woman hunting me to avenge her family, and those two terrorists I was living with, threatening to collapse the government while forcing me to assassinate the queen.*

“Mother, Father... I had been a bad son, and I always wanted to tell you that I was sorry for being so useless and not spending more time with you. I hope that you might find it in your heart to forgive me and take me back after all those years. I will become a better person, I promise. But please, let me return home. I beg of you, let me come back...” I muttered with my hands lifted in a prayer, pleading that someone would get me out of this mess. This time it had not even been my fault. All of that stuff had either happened already when I woke up, or was something I could not really have avoided. I fell to my knees, regretting to even be here in the first place.

*I want to go back into my old world...*

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“Shima, come here, it’s time for your makeup!” a voice came through the door. Without any strength in my body I stood up and went out of the room, right to Alis’ personal room.

She put me down on a chair and started applying makeup, humming happily while doing so. The worst thing about it was her applying mascara to dye my eyelashes, but it had to be done since they also were white, just like all the hair on this body.

The session with her felt like some kind of torture. Only after she also took care of my hair, decorating it with a pretty hair stick, she let me go.

And just when I was about to go back to my room, she shouted that Gav should come next. I was confused until he left my room, donning a blue dress with a white chest. Just above his hips the dress was expanding, hiding his masculine figure. I tried to not laugh at him, but failed after noticing that he even wore some long earrings, which was a weird combo with his short hair and his twitching lips.

He shot me an angry glare, telling me to shut up and vanished in the room from Alis, probably having to go through the same hell I had just experienced.

I briefly considered praying for him, but after remembering what he wanted me to do tonight I did not, going to my room instead to also get dressed.

Just an hour later all of us were ready. Well, almost. Alis was not happy with the way I put on my bra and started working behind me, pulling and pressing it some way or the other until she finally was satisfied despite me grumbling the whole time.

Only after that we went out, a black car already waiting for us. A muscular man with a tuxedo opened the door for us and closed it after we were inside.

Another man, not having any less muscles on him, started driving towards the keep.

“Let us go over the plan one more time.” Gav started, looking serious while putting one of his bangs from the blond wig back behind his ear. It was frightening how easily he had changed to a beautiful woman.

“Sure. I will start.” Alis said, clearing her throat.

“I will stay outside in the main hall that is open to the public. There will be some guild members there, trying to mix with the crowd. Since we have already prepared a number of woman from our brothels to talk up potential targets and gather intelligence, we are certain that we can fish them out relatively easy and get some information out of them. That is my part.”

Gav nodded. “I will go to the upper floor together with Shima, since we only could get two VIP tickets. I will try to get some information out of the people there, but my main focus is ensuring Shima can do his job. Sounds simple, but knowing him it will be no small task.”

“Hey!” I protested, resisting the urge to kick him. That earned me an look from both of them saying something like “You know that it is the truth”, so I only pouted at them. After a moment of awkward silence I finally noticed that they were waiting for me to repeat my mission today.

“Eh... I will poison the queen with this weird jawbone you gave me, killing a human the first time in my life...” I said, still not believing they forced me to do that.

Really, could Gav not do that himself? It is not like it *has* to be me, right? Gav exchanged a look with Alis, both nodded at each other.

“Okay, Shima, let us start again. The thing you have taped to your chest is a very old artifact from roundabout two hundred and fifty years ago, still producing a poison from its fangs that will kill any person in half a second.” Gav explained.

“The queen will be giving a short speech tonight, that much our agents that we planted into the staff serving the guests have confirmed. They also will create a window of opportunity to poison her drink if everything goes according to plan. But to do so we need someone to draw attention to himself, and that someone will be me, since you would only mess that part up.”

Ugh, I could not even argument against the part of me messing up something like this. I get stage frightened easily.

Carefully I touched my left breast, feeling the jaw I had to tape to it.

*The jaw with two big fangs. That, according to them, was used to kill over two hundred people in the past. That even could penetrate leather and iron armor without problems. And exactly those two fangs are pointed at me, only held back from touching my skin by that tape I found in the bag of my former body host. And the slightest pressure on the wrong spot could push those deadly fangs into my flesh, killing me after a single second.*

*And who did I have to blame? Well, that would be myself! Since my body was now that of a girl, I dared not to ask Gav to do it for me. And if I would ask Alis to do it, she would not hesitate to make a prostitute out of me the moment she would notice what gender my body had. That means I have to do it myself, and after Gav said I had to be able to get it out of my clothes as fast as possible without anyone noticing, I had found no other spot where I could tape it to other than my chest. And that is only because my chest is, luckily, so small that the smallest bra from the shop is still too big. And the jaw just happened to perfectly fitting under it and did not stick out in any way.*

“Why cant we just poison everyone in the upper floor if they are so important?” I asked, still not completely grasping why exactly I had to do it so personally.

“Because those people would be replaced by their families. It would change nothing, and, in the worst case, let them discover our true goals.” Alis answered.

“And why should it absolutely be me to poison the drink? I mean, I could trade with Alis.” I continued my questioning, but Gav shot me down with a very simple answer.

“Because *you* are *disposable*.”

He did not even show remorse about saying it, because to him it was only a fact.

*But so are also your other lackeys working for you! ...Or so i would like to think, but he probably values them higher than me.*

I let out a sigh and looked out the window. We were approaching the big palace I had spent the first night in this world at as an homeless and broke person. And now I would enter in an expensive dress, wearing makeup and joining a ball in there as a VIP, only a month later. What a turn of fate.

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Before we even reached the palace we stopped the first time. “This is where I get out.” Alis said, opening the door and closing it from the outside. We might have traveled together this far, but in order to not out ourselves as a group we would enter the ball alone with some time between our arrivals.

The car continued its way, driving between some back alleys near the palace. “Here you go. Be careful and don’t get abducted on the way.” Gav warned me.

"I know, I know. I'm not stupid." I shot back, pouting. Just as I closed the door from the outside, I could hear him mutter: "No, you *are* stupid. *And* careless."

I clicked my tongue, but the car was already driving away.

Since it was winter the sun had started setting early and it was already dark outside, which was very convenient for me and my skin. The only thing bothering me were the thick clouds hanging in the sky. Maybe it might snow soon, but considering how warm it was I doubted that.

*Such a shame. I bet this city would look really nice covered in thick snow.*

It did not take long for me to reach the palace, even though I was wearing high heeled shoes for the first time in my life. Yet it felt natural to me, as if I had done so already in the past.

Just as it came into view while I was approaching from the big street leading to it, I could spot Gav getting out of the car, walking along the red carpet while the crowd was watching his every move. I had to admit that he looked beautiful, but still, did he really have to use one of Alis bras and stuff it out? His chest was *way* over the top.

*Or was that the very reason they were looking at him?*

*Whatever. It is not like I am actually bothered by bust size. And that was even before I was thrown into this body with a chest so flat I did not even have to hide it to pass as a boy. No relationship between those things at all. Really!*

A few minutes later I also arrived at the red carpet, having already put on the theater mask that covered the upper face, just like the flyer said we should.

The entrance both Gav and I had taken was the VIP entrance and swarmed by men in black suits. Between them butlers were running around, greeting the guests.

One of them was coming to me. "Excuse me, but this entrance is for people with VIP tickets. The normal entrance is to the right." he said, pointing to a small gate where a lot of people were standing in line, curiously glancing at the VIP entrance. Instead of saying anything I opened the black handbag hanging from my shoulder and took out the VIP ticket, handing it to him.

"I am very sorry, Madam. I assumed you did not have one since you arrived on foot." he said, bowing deeply.

"N-No problem, I just felt like walking." I muttered, just as Gav had told me to. It just made me nervous that he was bowing to me like this, it just felt like I really was out of place.

He whispered something to the bodyguards and then told me to follow the red carpet until I would get to the stairs in the throne room to enter the VIP area.

With shaking knees I made my way further, noticing the stares I was receiving from the men that had gaped at Gav before.

*Honestly, I wish they would stop. It feels weird to be stared at like an art piece.*

The red carpet led me to a big door, but just before that I had to pass a white tent.

“Excuse me, Madam, but we need to check your handbag. After that please step through this gate.” a maid told me, also bowing before me.

*A Maid! A real Maid!*

Suppressing the smile creeping on my face while staring at her I nodded and handed her my handbag. She gave me a weird look before looking inside and pulling a metal detector over it. Next she signaled me to move through the gate.

I did as I was told, taking a big step through it, sure that nothing would happen.

And of course the gate made a loud beep and flashed a red light.

“I am sorry, but might I check your body with this metal detector?” the maid asked me. I nodded weakly, still shaken from the noise.

Turns out the metal part that had triggered the gate had been the closure from my bra. *I thought for a moment that they had noticed the jaw...*

Finally allowed to continue I entered the building, only to be greeted by yet another servant. “Is it your first time entering the palace?” he asked me, bowing before me. This was something Gav did not say anything about and I was clueless what I should say to him. But well, I guess it could not hurt to tell him the truth, right?

“Yes, it is my first time here.” I said, looking past him into the grand throne room. He stayed still, not getting up from his bow. “Would you like to get a little guide in that case? It wont be long and only cover the way to the staircase, Madam.”

*I had never been someone interested in history, but well... this was a fantasy world, even if a screwed one. Maybe it would have some nice lore?*

“Yes, please.” I answered him, hoping that there would be dragons, gods and magic appearing, or maybe even a demon lord. Could you blame me to hope for something like that?

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The gates had not yet been opened for the normal guests, so the first floor of the throne room was only filled with servants rushing around. The hall was wide and long, thick pillars were left and right, empty knight armors standing before them and banners with snakes on them hanging above them from the ceiling, going all the way till the platform with the throne.

The throne itself was massive and made out of marble, red satin was placed where the king would sit.

“That throne is two hundred years old, but the dark blue satin blanket next to it is even older.” the servant started. And indeed, next to the throne there was a dark blue blanket on the ground. “That does not seem like it was made for humans...” I casually remarked, only to slap my hand on my mouth. I do not think I was supposed

to say something like this, probably this was the space where the kings would have some mistress or something placed to show dominance.

“Indeed, it was not made for humans. This is the blanket the great hero of Krahenfels always had used when she was with king Rothwin in the throne room.”

*I could see how a demi human would struggle with normal chairs.*

“And if you look to your left, there are the portraits of every ruler since king Markus Julius Rothwin the first took the throne. The paintings were made when they were alive, but only placed on the wall after their death to honor them. That is also the very reason why there is no picture of our queen, Olivia Rothwin, the wife of Markus Julius Rothwin. After he retired the queen had also given up on the throne for the time and their daughter, Ailene Rothwin took the throne with the title of queen and married a prince from Korhat, strengthening their alliance between them and Harkur after the war against the United Nations that had collapsed after the war, bearing their child and the next queen, Sarah, named after the great hero Shaha, leading to...”

*Did Gav not say something about Harkur being the name of the state Krahenfels is located at? Eh, maybe I should look at a map of this world at some point, it is scary how much I still don't know about this place.*

The servant guiding me hadn't noticed that I had stayed behind and halfway through had stopped listening to him, still continuing talking about the succession line in one breath, reaching now the last three pictures.

Strangely, the two last pictures depicted a woman and a man, both looking alike, but they were placed vertically. *Please, don't say incest.*

“These two are Sha and Shaa, named after the brother and the mother of the great Hero of Krahenfels. They were siblings, but also the last in line for the throne. What exactly has happened after the world war with them and queen Olivia Rothwin is not clear since she still refuses to clarify the situation with the scholars, but they soon perished after the war and in the middle of the plague. It is assumed that they also succumbed to the plague, even if some old letters dispute that theory.

After both were declared as deceased the only legible suitor for the throne had been queen Olivia Rothwin. Since she returned to being a queen she greatly changed the way the country was ruled, forming our democracy.”

The man stopped, turned around and led me to the other side of the hall, stopping before a big oil painting that was secured behind thick glass.

“This is the last piece, and one of the most famous paintings in the world, called *Revenge Of A Saint*, painted after the very battle in which the legend of the Naga hero had been born.”

The painting pictured a hill made of bloody corpses in the center with a topless, female demi human standing on top, bleeding from many cuts, looking into the air and holding her spear up in a victory pose.

“The surviving soldiers on the enemy side and the the soldiers on Harkurs side both told the same stories about her slaying a thousand soldiers alone with nothing but her spear and her single fang, earning her the nickname of *battle god*. And if you look at the sides, you can see the soldiers coming from north, rescuing Krahenfels from the united nations, and to the right there is the burning Krahenfels, together with a parade celebrating the brave death her brother had died to save their kin. People from the whole continent come here to see this very painting with their own eyes since two hundred years, and I am proud every time I can show it to someone.”

*The painting was indeed impressive! This was the lore I had been waiting for. Gigantic battles, edgy nicknames, tough girls that could easily be the main heroine in battle stories... that is the very thing I hoped for from the start in this world! Too bad all that was only history now.*

I showed the servant a sincere smile, thanking him for guiding me and showing this painting to me. He seemed to blush a little, but I ignored it, continuing my way to the second floor.

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The way up on these stairs was a death trap waiting for me. The whole hall was gigantic, and even the second floor, similar half open just like the home of those two terrorists was, proofed how much space there was in here.

*So why did they have to make these steps so small, uneven and dangerous? Do they actually want me to trip? Did they expect that I would put a deadly weapon on my chest, its fangs pointing at me, threatening to kill me if I were to fall on them or touch them the wrong way hundreds of years ago?*

Grumbling I continued my way up, trying to find my balance so I would not fall.

And, just when I thought I was safe having almost reached the top, I *did* trip. Suddenly I saw the ground rushing towards me. And for a moment I thought I could see my life flashing before my eyes.

But before I hit the ground and rammed the deadly fangs into my chest a strong hand caught me, putting me back on my feet again.

“Thank you...” I muttered, breathing heavy, trying to calm down. The man that saved me was a man with broad shoulders, a stubble beard and gray hair combed to the side, his eyes hidden by a fancy mask adorned with gold. “Are you okay, young lady? You know, you are supposed to lift the hem of your skirt if you use the stairs.” he told me with a smile.

*Wait... that is the old fart! What the hell is he doing here?*

I nodded and stepped to the side so I would not block the stairs. "I am afraid I still have something to do, so we will conclude our business later." he said, waving at me while going the steps down.

*What business? And why was he already leaving when the event had not even started?* I sighed silently, not having the mental capacity right now to exactly figure out what the hell was going on with him. I still had a queen to poison and the very idea of killing someone still weighed heavy on my heart.

But standing around moping would not help me and also just earn me angry stares from Gav, who was also supposed to be up here somewhere.

I looked around, spotting a crowd gathering around a place, and a buffet nearby with snacks. I decided to go there, being stopped by one of the servants with trays on their hand running around. He offered me a wine glasses from his tray. I nodded and took a glass that seemed to contain white wine.

*It had been a while since I have had some alcohol. Time to drink some until I have the courage to actually poison someone!*

I took a sip, waiting for the taste of the alcohol, but almost choked when pure sweetness filled my mouth. Confused I looked at the glass, then took another sip. *There was grape juice in it.*

*I forgot that alcohol had been banned in this world. What a farce, such a nice ceremony, but all the bigwigs drinking grape juice. I mean, what was next? Whiskey replaced with apple juice?* I giggled at the thought, picturing it in my head with some mafia boss you could see in movies sipping apple juice with an serious face.

"What are you laughing about?" A girl next to me asked. She had black, wavy hair that went to her neck, a white mask over her her upper face hiding her eyes, and was half a head smaller than me. But I recognized the outfit she wore, a black dress with golden embroidery and frills, black gloves and a cape over her shoulders, reaching to her waist and black knee socks with black boots.

"Nothing, I just remembered some joke I had heard before." I said, trying to not be suspicious or weird. *I probably failed that part already.*

The girl nodded, but she seemed to stare at my face. "Say, do we know each other? I got the feeling that I have seen you before, but that cant really be... or can it?" she muttered, mustering my face intensively.

"Wait, are you the shut in girl?!" I clasped my hands, finally remembering where I had seen that dress before.

"S-Shut in girl?! That is not- well, I suppose it might be true, b-but anyway! When did we meet?" The girl was blushing under her mask, it looked kind of cute. So cute that I wanted to rub her cheeks and pet her head. *But no, I do not want to be like*



*Alis. No way I am gonna stop resisting these urges, and that devilish woman trying to get me into her bed and sell my body is the perfect example for why!*

I cleared my throat. "I was the person that had slept in front of the main gate of this palace." I told her. "I made a slight recovery since then. Told you it would be fixed in the future!" I said, looking proud of myself and conveniently forgetting the fact that I was actually just mooching off on terrorists.

"Oh! I thought you were a boy! But I am glad to see that you are well. I even asked at the orphanage if they had taken a black haired boy in before, but they said they had not, so I had been *really* worried!"

Tears came to my eyes and I covered my mouth with my hand. This girl had just met a stranger on the side of the road and actually cared about them! She really was some sweet angel! *She would be a perfect heroine!*

"Oh, uh, what is your name?" I stuttered nervously.

"My name?" The girl did look a bit troubled. "You can call me Livia for now." She giggled for some reason, holding her hand before her mouth while doing so.

My cheeks felt hot, but I ignored the burning sensation. "Nice to meet you, Livia. I am Shima. And thank you again for caring about me when I was at a low point in my life." I hesitated for a moment, then I held out my hand, trying to hide how nervous I was. She looked at it, paused for a moment, but then she gave me her right hand, shaking it. It felt weird and cold with something hard under the glove.

*Oh, she had some illness on her right hand, I forgot! That is probably why she looked so troubled for a moment.*

"Sorry if I made you uncomfortable." I apologized to her, but she shook her head. "Do not worry about that, I do not mind." She waved her hands before her chest while saying that.

"Will you marry me?" asked a loud voice somewhere behind me. Surprised, I turned around, searching for the one responsible.

*And when I found the source, I wish I had not.*

Gav was standing in the middle of the crowd, all the men fixing their eyes on him, the woman staring at him like he was kind of devil and an old man kneeling before him, holding her- *his* hand. The man had a tissue in the other hand while there was something wet dropping from the hem of Gav's dress.

"Oh, really? I would be honored to be together with someone like you. But I would like to get to know you better first, so would you maybe join me for a drink? One that I will not spill this time?" Gav said, his voice sounding like a mix between flirty, happy and coming across as weirdly... feminine.

*Well... maybe he does swing that way. I suspected as much already the way he never reacts to any of those girls in the red light district or seeing me naked.*

"Every time we have those balls, so many woman pretend to be clumsy and cute,

trying to catch someone with a lot of money so they have an easy life. It is annoying, no matter how many times I see something like this.” Livia muttered next to me, looking with disdain at the smiling couple.

*Clumsy and cute...? Wait, did the old fart think I was trying to flirt with him after he caught me, and that is why he fled the scene, saying we will conclude this later?*

“No way...” I said, curling at the thought that this could be considered flirting. Loud voices started to echo through the hall from the lower floor, it seems the entry for everyone has been permitted. Curious I went to the railing and looked down, trying to spot the one face I would know in the masses.

“Oh, is it already time to let them in?” Livia asked, having tagged along with me.

“Seems like it. Probably the actual party will start soon.” I said, still looking at the masses from above. Just like me before they were in awe of the size, and a big crowd gathered before the oil painting depicting the Naga hero and the guide from before.

Livia looked down with a slight smile before she let out a sigh. “Sorry, Shima, but I have to go for now. We will meet again later!” She said and went away. I waved after her, but then I focused on the masses again, trying to spot Alis. I found her instantly, since I just had to look for the biggest cleavage.

*That girl really did not hold back with her charms.*

But the thing that disturbed me was that a certain other girl was also down there. *Janine Kroskow*, the target I did not kill twice and the person who was out for my blood. I had to be careful moving around now.

*Hopefully she would not notice me. But as long as I stay in the VIP area I should be safe. I hope.*

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Servants appeared on both floors, informing the guest that the dance hall would now be opened. They also told us VIPs that we were to use the upper part in the back while we could go to the lower area if we wanted to. From Gav I already knew that the VIP area was closest to the stage with the entrance for servants next to it, being partly hidden with curtains and the tables that would be loaded with food, making the place perfect for poisoning a glass secretly.

The dance hall was just as big as the throne hall had been. Tables bending under the amount of the plates loaded with food were standing at the wall, keeping the center clear for the dance event. Big chandeliers were hanging from the ceiling, hundreds of small lamps on each of them.

The hall itself was divided into three spaces. The stage, the upper part and the lower part, the last two being divided by a small staircase and the lower part being the closest to the door that everyone entered from.

The floor consisted of black and white tiles that were polished so hard that they were reflecting the light. This whole room just screamed from the wealth it took to build, probably to show off to the important guests visiting the kingdom.

A man appeared on the stage, dressed in an expensive looking suit and a golden mask covering his upper part of the face. He had a stubble beard, black hair with gray lines between them that kempt back and fixed by hair gel. With a grin he looked around, mustering the crowd in the hall.

“My dear visitors. Friends. Colleagues. And the very foundation of the nation we live in.” He started, catching the attention of everyone.

“Today is a very special day. Today is the birthday of the very foundation of our nation.” He nodded slowly as if to put weight into his words. “That is right, today marks a very special day for our guild. The *Guild* everyone here is working either with or for. The birthday of *our* guild. But not just *any* birthday.” He made a dramatic pause, looking at the audience from left to right. “Our guild is turning four hundred years old today, and it is still standing strong, protecting everyone and leading each man to happiness. Four. Hundred. Years. Imagine that.” He made a short pause again, before he suddenly shouted with joy in his voice: “And we will stand strong for another four hundred years! And we will continue to make everyone just as happy as they have been in the past!”

Applause started coming, going for a while, but after a minute he started to wave, signaling he wanted to continue.

“To celebrate that we have this special ball today, much in the tradition of Harkur and how the guild celebrated in the old times! Honor the traditions, as we say!”

Again the people started to clap, the loudest ones being from the lower area. He waited for the applause to die down before he continued.

“Also I am happy to announce that we will make the parade of the snake, that has become its very own Krahenfels tradition, a very special one this year. As a celebration we will be sponsoring every wagon participating and even have planned a little reveal where we will announce our plans for the future. And believe me, they are exciting. I hope to see everyone of you there. It will change how we see the world, I promise that to you.”

The applause started again, even stronger this time. From the lowest floor I could hear cheering. The man waited for some time, letting the people cool down for a bit, until he started again.

“And the next point on the list *would be* a surprise guest. Well, *would be*, because someone wanted to make an announcement before that, and the surprise guest

already said she would love to get this done before she appears.” He made a small bow and a wave with his arm to the side. “And with that, let me introduce you to the mayor of Krahenfels, Doroff Hasdo, and the pretty woman accompanying him, Lagavia Sorkof!”

The happy pair I had seen before made their way on the stage, the pretty man pretending to be a woman, Gav, and the poor victim that asked him to marry only thirty minutes ago.

Figuring that this was his way to give me an opening I went to the side of the stage, taking a glass from one of the servants passing me and searched for a spot where I could be out of focus for a second.

And indeed there was a small curtain near one of the tables that I could stand behind. From here only my back would be visible and I would not look suspicious since food was lined up before me. With a shaking hand I opened my handbag, put the glass on the table and reached to my chest, cramming the jaw out from under my bra. Trying to not scratch myself with the fangs while pulling it out I looked around nervously, but no one in the crowd seemed to notice me.

*Maybe I should have gone to the bathroom before and put the bone into my handbag beforehand.* But that thought was too late anyway. After I finally fished that stupid jaw out I dunked one of the teeth into the glass and took it out.

“Shima?” asked a voice behind me. I jumped a little from the shock of being called out, throwing the jaw hastily into my handbag and closing it. “Yes?” I asked, taking the glass with poisoned juice and turning around.

Livia had appeared behind me, but she had changed her black dress to another one that seemed more gaudy with red satin and golden decorations. Even the red cape she was wearing now was noticeably longer, giving her a different aura. “Why did you change?” I asked her, but she ignored it, asking me a question instead.

“Don’t you like the grape juice?” She was looking at my untouched glass, curiously glancing at it. I shook my head. “Its not that. Well, it is a bit too sweet for me, so I will maybe drink it later...” I said, trying to change the topic away from the poisoned glass. I started sweating at the thought of her suspecting anything, and my legs still felt wobbly.

“Oh, if that is the case, let me drink it. I am parched.” She snatched the cup from my hands while saying that, not even waiting for me to answer.

I was too perplex to react, but now she had the cup with deadly poison that killed a person in seconds, its effects tested and confirmed from Gav personally on some poor animals. And she was bringing that glass to her lips now.

“Ah, Livia, please do not-” I shouted, trying to get the glass back, but it was too late. Livia was downing the drink in one go, taking even a step back so I would not disturb her.

“And with this I formerly announce that I will take Lagavia as my wife!” the mayor shouted, the hall starting to cheer.

“Oh, thank you, darling!” Gav said, hugging the mayors shoulders while smiling and pressing his fake chest at his arms. I registered it only as background noise while I was staring at Livia while my thoughts had stopped.

“What is wrong? I really thought you would not want it, sorry.” she said, smiling at me, not looking sorry at all.

*She is still alive.*

*Did I mess up? Did I screw up something so the poison did not come out? Thank you god! Really! Thank you, this one time!*

I finally stopped staring at her and shook my head. “Sorry, Livia. It was just that I had taken a sip from the spot before, so I wanted to warn you.” That lie came out smoother than I thought it would be possible with my heart nervously beating this hard, but honestly, that I was even able to speak after nearly killing her was more than I had hoped for.

“Oh, is that so? I do not mind that, though. But now I do need to go again, sorry.” With that, she got up and left again, going through the door next to the stage.

I wanted to sit down and take a breather, trying to calm my nerves. But after I had failed to poison the drink I needed to prepare another glass. The only good thing about that was that I had no longer fangs pointing at my chest that could kill me any-time.

With shaking legs I went to the next servant, got a new glass of juice, positioned myself back in the same spot and put the fangs in it again, this time stirring them and squeezing them above the glass, seeing how something dripped out of the small hole and landed in the drink. *This* time I was sure it was poisoned.

*Why was I doing that again? Oh, because of those two threatening me.*

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The man that held the first speech had appeared again on the stage after the mayor had officially announced his wedding and was talking about a surprise guest holding a speech. I already knew which guest it would be and had positioned myself near the door next to the stage, the very same Livia had went through before. I knocked against it two times, then another four times after a pause. A servant opened the door a bit, mustering me. “You are late.” he said, but I chose to ignore it. I stepped away from the door a bit and looked at the stage, appearing like I was focused on something else. The servant opened the door just as planned and ran against me, starting to apologize and bow before me. While he did so I quickly changed out the glass on the tray he was holding with the poisoned one, hiding it with our bodies from

the crowd. "Get your ass up there already, you incompetent swine!" a maid that appeared behind him hissed. "The glass was supposed to already stand there two minutes ago." she continued, but stopped after she saw me.

"I am sorry you had to witness this." She said, bowing to me and going back. The servant gave me an angry glare and went up behind the curtains, putting the tray on a small table.

With that my job was done. The request that Gav and Alis had for me has been fulfilled. But the worst part for me had yet to come. Seeing a person die I poisoned was something I did not want to do, but Gav had warned me from leaving the grounds too early.

*Oh, considering I just set up poison to kill someone, should I not maybe try to hide the object that was used for it? Now that I think about it, would they not find the perpetrator quickly if they would search the guests? Why did not think earlier of that?*

Realizing I might have overlooked something very important I could feel the blood draining from my face.

*Am I actually stupid? Is Gav right? He would not abandon me like this, right? No, most likely they set me up.*

I looked into the crowd, trying to find one of those two terrorists.

*I knew too much, so they would rather kill me than have me go to prison. So... did they plan my death? Does that mean that not only Janine Kroskow is among the guests, trying to kill me, but those two are also planning it? Or is that actually also part of their plan that she will find me?*

I sat down on a chair at the realisation that I was most likely doomed the moment I poisoned the juice, my death being certain now. *I have to think of something so I can escape this place, alive at best. And even if I would go to jail, that probably still would be better than being killed by those two.*

*...Wait, didn't Gav mention there being a death sentence before? Would it not be very plausible to put me on the death row after I poisoned a queen, making me die anyway, even if I get arrested? That might even be worse!*

The crowd started to cheer, the man was making place for the special guest, even bowing to her. The queen was entering the stage, taking the glass that would kill her in her hands and stepped to the center.

She was wearing a gaudy dress with golden decorations and red satin, a long red cape and a black veil covering her face. She was small, a bit smaller than me, but the people still applauded and cheered, shouting "Your majesty!".

That person on the stage... *that was Livia! I could not see her face through the veil, but the moment she started to speak I was sure of it! And I had just seen her in that very outfit, drinking the first glass of poison I tried to prepare!*

"I thank you all for coming here today. I am honored to once again speak to you, to

the very people I swore to protect and to give my life for, however endless it might be.” Again the people applauded.

*She is the queen? Livia... no, Olivia? The kind girl? I am going to be responsible for murdering her?*

Doubts crept up in my head, my hand holding the glass she was supposed to have began shaking. I started to get dizzy, my skin feeling sweaty all of a sudden. I knew that my actions today would kill someone. I knew that I would have to live with this guilt for the rest of my short life, but I did not expect to know the person I was going to kill *personally*. What did she even do here before among the common folk? Why the hell was she even going out alone in the early morning, talking to a homeless guy on the street? Was she crazy? She had to be! This is her own fault! *It has to be her own fault, because anything else would break me!*

“Thank you all for coming tonight, my dear people. It makes me happy to see how the traditions from old times still are hold up, even though I know many of you are not happy with some of the recent changes in the politics and regulations we issued. That has become a very hot topic for many and I am sure a lot of you want to question me about it. But for tonight, just let me say that I am certain that they will benefit everyone of you.” The mood turned a bit at that, but most people nodded.

“But please, let us forget about politics for tonight. This is a party, after all!” She said with waving hands, causing the people to laugh.

She made a dramatic pause, looking around. “Just as Theodore has said before, today is the four-hundred birthday of the guild, making it almost twice as old as I am.”

Some people laughed again.

“And having lived half the time of it already, I can tell you with certainty that that number is nothing to sneeze on. My dear husband was already leading the guild as a royal member when I was just turning six and his second wife- Shaha- was also working for it before I arrived here.”

She grasped the glass with both hands, looking into it for a moment before she continued.

“The guild has a big sentimental value for me. But even more important than that, it also holds value for everyone in this city. And in the last hundred years, it started to become important for everyone on the continent. Having achieved something so great, connecting our United Nations like this, I can say only one thing-”

She took the glass into her left hand. “Long live the Guild! So it will protect us another four-hundred years!” She shouted, raising her arm holding the glass, the man that had spoken at first also raising a glass, standing behind her. The people around me all did the same, forcing me to follow no matter how conflicted I was feeling right now.

And then she started drinking the poison. First she took a big sip, took a look at her

glass, then she drowned the rest. Maybe I was imagining it, but I felt like she had shot me a look before downing the rest of it.

Imitating the crowd, I also took a big sip out of my glass, hoping the sweet juice would help me cheer up when she would break down dead in a few seconds.

The liquid entered my mouth and I was waiting to taste the sweetness from the juice, but somehow it tasted bitter, letting me choke a bit. *This is wine!*

I looked once again at the queen, and she was still standing on the stage, watching the crowd. Or rather, me. *Did she know?*

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The queen had left the stage and made place for the orchestra playing classical music, the people around me had started dancing in pairs. But I was still sitting on the chair, clutching the empty glass of wine, my legs refusing to let me stand up.

Gav came out of the crowd, holding two empty glasses, one of them having lipstick on it, taking something from the buffet next to me without even looking at me.

“What happened?” he whispered angrily at me without turning around.

“I did exactly like you told me to. I made it a hundred percent sure that the poison was in the glass. The glass definitely made it on the stage. No one exchanged it up there. And the queen did drink it.” I whispered back, but my voice carried no will, I was merely stating facts.

Gav clicked annoyed his tongue. “You will stay here until the party is over and sneak into her room. Use the fangs directly on her. Do you understand?” he said, putting something on a plate while talking.

I nodded, but I did not think I could do that. And even worse, I spotted the target walking around between the guests, no one recognizing her since she had changed back into the black dress with frills and golden embroidery she had worn before the speech. She was looking at me with a smile on her face, seeming to wait for me to approach her.

“I will see what I can do.” I replied to the order from Gav, since he had not seen my nod. “Do *not* mess this up. We invested a lot in this.”

I stood up, forcing my legs to obey me, and went to the queen, who was still looking at me with a smile. When I came closer, she held out her hand.

“May I ask you for a dance?”

There was no hint of any anger or distrust in her voice. She just seemed happy to see me again it seemed.

*Maybe I did mess up somehow? Or maybe she actually is immortal and never noticed the poison? That must be it, yeah. I was just too paranoid!*

I let a weak smile on my face. “Is that really alright, majesty?” I asked her.



"I don't know what I would have done if you had not realized it." she giggled. After some hesitation I took her hand she was holding out to me, trying to hide the shaking.

"I can't dance. I have never learned it before."

"Is that so? In that case just follow my lead." she said, putting her hand on my hips, making me jump back a little. *Wait, am I the follower? Isn't that the female part? I mean, I know that she is doing this because she is the one teaching me, but still! My pride as a man is on the line here! ...Not that I really have that much of it left after I screamed at the sight of my first period. I mean, I knew that it would happen. But to get to the toilet in the morning and unexpectedly see a bloody mess in your underwear, who would not scream at that?*

I shoved that embarrassing memory of that cursed morning from a week ago into the back of my mind and started to concentrate on my feet so I would not step on the toes of the queen.

*The most important person on this continent.*

*Who wanted to dance with me right now for some reason I did not know.*

"You need to follow the rhythm more. And no need to be so careful with your steps, you cant hurt me, I promise." She instructed me.

But my legs still felt like pudding, I felt sweaty, and my mind was still trying to catch up with this messy situation I found myself in.

"What is wrong, did the wine get to your head? Come on, stop shaking so much." the queen scolded me. "Sorry..." I muttered silently, trying to match her again, not wanting to fail her.

"..." I thought back to what she just said. I looked up again, right on the slits in her mask where here eyes were lying behind.

"Wait, what did you just say?"

"I hope you did like the wine I got from my secret stash. I thought you might like it since you said the juice was too sweet." She still had the sweet smile on her face, not showing any signs of anger. "I-I don't know what you mean, majesty?" I said nervously, trying to play dumb. She shook her head. "No need to call me that. Just use my name. My *real* name."

"I- I could not- wait no, I mean, I- I..." I tried to make sense of this, but my mouth was betraying me.

"I had missed this kind of poison, you know? Godwin had collected some in the past from Shaha, but together with her every source of it that we knew of had been lost since her subspecies was gone."

"W-What? P-Poison you s-say?" I replied, trying to take a step back, but Olivia still hold my right hand in her own, pulling me closer with her arm around my hip and holding me to her while still forcing me to continue dancing.

"I do know *one* source that is left, but that should be closed away in the safest place I know of. So, since that is not a possibility, please, tell me. Are there any survivors? Did maybe some escape the extermination from Julius?"

"I- I-" I started again, trying to keep up with her dancing, not knowing what I should do right now. "I am sorry you quite lost me there, Olivia." I finally got out, smiling weakly at her again.

"No need to play dumb with me. I know that it was you since I had seen and tasted the first glass of it right from you."

"I, uh..." So the glass had been poisoned. She drank it. Twice. And she was still standing here like nothing happened.

"So please tell me if someone survived. That is very important to me." She looked at me pleadingly, her smile turning into a sad one, but not letting me go anywhere, but at least she had stopped dancing now.

"I was so scared when you gulped that first glass down. I thought I would kill you without even wanting to. I... I did not... I was scared to death..." I confessed, my lips twitching and tears forming in my eyes.

"And yet you tried it a second time. The nerve of some people, tsk tsk tsk." she scolded me, waving a finger before my eyes and laughing.

"I did not know that you are the queen! I assumed you were just someone working in the palace because you were outside without any guards and helping a stranger!"

"Well, but I am. And that did not answer my question, remember?" She said, letting go of my hip, but still holding my hand firmly.

"I do not know who you mean with having survived, but I can tell you where that poison came from. But please spare my life- or better yet, protect it!" I started pleading to her.

"Protect you?" She tilted her head and looked around. "Well, I might get what you mean. You surely were not working alone." She let go of my hand and leaned forward and got on her toes, bringing her mouth near my ear. "Wait until the party is over. I am waiting for you in the uppermost floor, the room at the end of the hallway. Don't worry about being stopped, there are no guards. I never needed them anyway." Having said that she turned around and left me.

"Oh, you actually do like girls." A voice behind me giggled. I turned around to see Alis standing there with an amused look, holding an empty glass.

"Are you even allowed to be up here? Also, did Gav not say that we should not talk with each other?" I asked her, trying to shoo her off.

She gave me an angry look with her eyes, their glance not matching the smile she was wearing. "Well, that was in preparation for *something* to happen. But since it did *not* happen we can scratch that, honey."

She came close, putting her arm the same way around my hips that Olivia had just done before. She also leaned closer, her mouth next to my ear, ignoring my struggling to get away from her. *Did they both think I would like that or something?*

“If my suspicion about that person you talked to are right, you surely will see it through, wont you?” she whispered.

I paused a moment to think before I returned the question.

“Say, if the poison attempt had worked, would I have made it out of here alive?” I asked her, my voice low. She did not move away from my ear, still whispering.

“Seems like you sometimes *do* use your head, honey. Yes, there was a chance you could have survived it, at least if you had successfully avoided being discovered with that jaw. But Gav and I are not that heartless that we would cut off someone that helped us. Remember that.” With that she let go of me and left me alone, disappearing in the crowd. I looked after her, noticing how everyone was following her with their eyes, no matter the gender. She had a talent, I had to admit, turning every head like this.

## 6: A Date At Night

I was spending the rest of the party hiding myself in a toilet stall, trying to escape the crowd and that woman searching for me. After I woke up from a short nap I went out and returned to the dance hall. The massive crowd from before was gone by now. Only a handful of guests remained, resting and eating some of the leftovers while the staff had already started cleaning the room. Giving my best to not look suspicious I went into a random hallway, pretending I was supposed to be here.

Walking curelessly through the many hallways for quite some time I finally managed to find a staircase that led upwards, only to be greeted by a locked door on top.

*It was really nice that the queen had given me a description of where her room was located, but please, next time tell me how to get there, not just where I had to end up!*

After continuing my search for another while I finally gave up and asked one of the servants running around for help, throwing any caution into the wind. Luckily for me it was the man from before that had swapped the glasses with me and he just straight up led me to the door.

And, how else could it be, it was a door that I had run by at least ten times without noticing it. I thanked the man for his time and made my way upwards to the fourth

floor.

The ground and the walls were made out of wood here that had turned dark with age, letting this part of the palace seem less luxurious than the lower floors.

I followed the hallway, just like Olivia had said I should, passing a huge door standing open with a big library behind it.

Arriving at the last door at the end of the hallway I checked my dress once more. *It might not look like it, but the queen was behind this door. She might have been lenient with me so far, but I should not think that should be the norm.*

*The dress looks good, my hair is like it is supposed to be. So I should be fine, right? I think I forgot something, but everything seems okay so far. Time to knock!* “You are late.” a voice said behind it. *The second time someone said that to me today! Come on!*

I opened the door after she said nothing else and peeked inside. There was a big bed in the middle of the room, just straight across the door, completely with white sheets. And on the bed was the queen, her head pointing into my direction. She held her feet, still in boots, in the air while slowly moving them up and down and had a book under her face that she was supporting with one hand, while she was turning the page with her other hand.

“You can come in. Also, please take the mask off.” She said, having only glanced up once after I entered. *I knew I had forgotten something!*

She sat up and closed the book. “So, please tell me. Where did you get that poison?”

“Well, I have been wondering for a while now, but is it really poison? I mean, I always called it like that before, but wouldn't it be technically venom? I never cared about stuff like this but now I really am wondering about this, I mean how could I not?” I started muttering. *I knew that that had to be kind of random for her, I get it. But still, both Gav and Alis made clear what would happen to me if I would fail killing her. And here she was, having even invited me into her room, no other person in sight, even asking me to show her the weapon. It was just my nerves letting me questions random things, okay?*

“Shima, please.” she said, a serious look on her face.

I averted my eyes and opened my handbag, carefully taking out the jaw with the two fangs.

“What?! How did you get that!” Olivia screamed, jumping from the bed and storming to me, ripping the jaw from my hand.

“That is- how is that possible? That was supposed to be in the safest place in the world...” she muttered, drawing her fingers over the bone.

“Uh... what do you mean?” I asked her, but she did not answer. Instead she removed the glove on her left hand before she rammed the fangs into her own flesh, blood dropping from the wound on the ground.

She did not even flinch at the pain that it must have caused, but instead looked dejected, pulling it out and staring at it.

I took out a handkerchief from my handbag and reached for her arm, trying to stop the bleeding despite the panic that rose in me.

“No need to do that.” she said, showing me her hand. There was no blood. Or even a trace of a wound. And, as if it never had happened, there was no blood on the ground.

“Technically its venom, but it can also act as poison. The substance produced in these fangs is absolutely deadly.” She made a small pause before continuing. “Julius annihilated Shahas tribe and mother, the war had taken her brother and the time had taken her. Not leaving any child their subspecies was gone and with them their unique poison.”

She looked shortly at me. “A little fact unknown to most is that they could instantly kill even the biggest monsters with those fangs, but they still chose to hunt them with spears instead. Do you know why? Because they would have died if they had eaten the flesh that had their poison in it. Only the slime in their throat could absorb it, but the moment it would enter their stomach, they were done for. A truly destructive evolution of their species and one of the things Godwin really had bitten his teeth out on as to why they even had developed it.”

“That... sounds rough.” I said, wondering why she told me all of this.

“Say, where did you get this?” she asked without looking at me.

I scratched the back of my head, not sure if I should tell her. After considering that she had already put the fangs in her body on her own volition, I could assume the quest Gav and Alis had given me had failed anyway.

*So the queen really was immortal.*

*But if I get out of this mess and would return to them, would they believe me? Or would they just abandon me after I failed at every task they had given me? Maybe I should try to escape from them instead. Or better yet, get help from the queen.*

“The man who gave me this said he got it from a vault in a bank.”

“Not possible. I personally ensured that this thing would lie in the safest vault we could create so no one could get it. Your friend would have needed to break into the international bank to steal that. And yet I have not heard any news about a break in.” The queen shook her head, still glaring at the jaw.

“Well, um... about that...” she finally looked up, but I could not meet her gaze.

“I do not know how they did it, but they did break in. And even got away with a truck full of gold, three of those fancy healing pebbles and apparently this thing. And, to be

completely honest, I am kind of involved in that whole mess even though I never wanted to.”

I still was avoiding her gaze, confessing everything like I was young again, being scolded by my parents why I lied to them about my homework or attending classes.

“When did that happen?”

“About a month ago.”

She fell silent again for a moment, then she shook her head in disbelief. “Why did no one inform me in that case? Or why did no one ever say anything about that? I mean, I am holding the proof that it happened in my hands, but still, that does not make any sense. Why?”

“That is something I would rather ask you. Why would the queen who is supposed the head of the continent be left in the dark?”

“That is... not exactly true... about me being the head.” she muttered silently.

“Well, but that acquaintance of mine told me that they took almost all the gold in the vault and dumped it somewhere where no one would ever find it again.”

“What?” she looked up again, staring at me.

“They predicted that the guild would stay silent about it and wanted to create an opportunity through it to get close to you and get you killed. That would seed distrust in the public towards the guild and the government, giving an opportunity to use this to destroy the system. And well, it seems they were right about the first part, since no word of it got out until now.”

Her hands started to run over the jaw again, tracing the fine lines engraved into it that seemed similar to the ones on the pebble. “Destroy the system... after everything that we...” she shook her head, putting the jaw into her pocket.

“May we go meet your friend? I need to talk to him. He cant kill me anyway, but I want to know more about them. Maybe we can settle it that way.”

“Wait wait wait!” I said, stepping back from her. “I do have some questions of my own! And there was a promise we made!” I said, trying to stop her from that idea, coming up with the best excuses that came into my mind.

“One question then.” she said, putting her arms in front of her chest.

“How did you know I was mixing potion into the first drink anyway? I was sure no one could see what I had been doing!” I said, still trying to figure out why she had known.

“Oh, I just had a kind of feeling. I mean, one day I met you sleeping on the street, and next month you are in the VIP lounge? Common, you just *had* to be either a thief or assassin.” She waved her hand to the side, looking bored. And well, she did have kind of a point.

“And the promise about protecting me?” I forced out.

“Huh? I never made such a promise. I only told you I get what you mean, not that I could grant you any. And now lets go, it has been two questions already and I want

to meet your friends.” she said with a smile, locking her arm with mine and pulling me out of the room, ignoring my protests and dragging me along.

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Still arm in arm she was pulling me along down the stairs I had came up. Finally we arrived on the first floor and walked through the long hallway.

“You know, you can let go of me...” I said to her, trying to keep up with her. She was fast considering that she was even smaller than me. “So you can run away? No chance. I need you to guide me to your friends.” she said, still smiling, pulling me closer. *She was scared of that only now? I could just have left the party after her invitation!* “But if you are walking in front of me I cant even guide you to where they are.” I protested, trying to get her away from me.

“You have a point there. But we will cross that bridge when we get to it.”

She opened a big door in the hallway and went trough. We were entering the now dark throne hall through a door that was located behind the throne itself. Not even letting me time to awe at the sight again she continued pulling me with her, passing the throne.

“Oh, did you find a new toy, my majesty?” a deep voice behind us said. Surprised the both of us stopped and turned around. There was a man with a golden mask sitting on the throne, I recognized him as the guy starting the speech at the ball.

“What is it, Theodore?” Olivia asked, no hurry in her voice. It seemed she trusted him.

He waved with his hand. “Oh, nothing, really. I just had seen a few interesting faces at the ball tonight. Some faces that are new, some that are well known to me.”

He shot me a short look at the last part. “There was the head of the black market who was making deals with poisoned alcohol, his competition, trying to sell all kinds of drugs, a lot of people in weirdly provocative outfits seducing important people for the guild, the girl the mayor confessed to, a woman hunting a boy... oh, and two legendary assassins all in all.” He smiled at me. *Did he know?*

“That boy you are taking with you, what do you want with him?” he asked Olivia. She tilted her head, looking at me. “Boy? Wait, are you one?” she asked, looking into my eyes with a pure look. “I am a gir-” I started shouting out of reflex but stopped myself and let out a small cough. “Technically I am a girl...” I finally told her, my face blushing.

“Technically...?” she asked me, tilting her head, but before she could press the question further Theodore interrupted her.

“So? Where are you taking the person that is *technically a girl?*” he asked again, his face stern.

“I have something I wish to know, so I am gonna go on a date with... him... her? Whatever, we are going now. And I will have some questions for you when I return, Theo.” she finally said, pulling on my sleeve and walking towards the door. “Enjoy your *date* then.” he said, waving his hand.

*Did my former body host work for him once? Or did Olivia tell him about me, but I am not getting punished? What is going on here?*

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We were walking together the long and big road leading to the keep in the center of the city. While Olivia did insist on holding my right hand, she at least did not pull me anymore with the force she had before.

The street was wet, reflecting the light of the street lamps. It had rained while we had been inside, but the dark clouds above us were not gone, still hanging low.

“So, what are you now?” She wanted to know after a few minutes of silence.

“What would you *want* me to be?” I questioned back, trying to tease her.

“I don’t care. I just want to know.” She said flat out.

I put a hand on my glasses, striking a pose.

“My body is that of a small girl, but my mind that of an adult man. My name is-”

“I was serious about that!” she interrupted me, pulling my hand.

I cleared my throat. “Well, My body is feminine. But I am a boy at heart!” I declared, turning my head away, being embarrassed about having to say it. She let out a frustrated sigh, it seems she did not really trust that statement.

*Does it even matter? It’s not even my own body!*

“Anyway, why were you so frustrated about that jaw? Do you have some personal history with it?” I asked her, trying to change the topic.

Her hand was clenching mine for a moment before she answered. “It is the weapon that caused my husband to exterminate the family of his second wife. One man had killed over two hundred people at random with it in the span of two and half years, all over the country, no one suspecting a thing about him until he had been killed by one of his victims after making a mistake. Thanks to that weapon every victim showed the unmistakable biting mark of a tribe of humanoid monsters, forcing the hand of my husband. And until today no one understands why it is still producing its venom, or how the man had even gotten it in the first place.”

She stopped, and looked straight up. “At least no one has proven why and how.” With that she turned to me, a sad smile on her face. I thought I could see something weird with her eyes for a moment, but before I could react she turned away. “So, where do we even need to go?” she asked me with a completely happy voice, putting her free hand on her hip, acting like the drop in her mood before never hap-



pened.

“The red light district in the old city.” I answered and she nodded. “Okay, then follow me. I know the fastest route from here.” she exclaimed, pulling me into a alley to the left.

“Why do you know a shortcut to that place?!” I asked her with a shout, which she commented with a laugh. “I am quite old, you know? I have been spending more than two hundred years in this city after all!”

I caught up to her again, still holding her hand because she would not let go, and caught my breath again. The body I had now was really sturdy, at least compared to my old one, but Olivia somehow even had bigger stamina reserves than me.

“Are you really that old?”

I mustered her. She still looked like something between not really a child but also not quite adult, more like a teenager that had just become one, yet seeming somehow older than that. Her appearance and behavior did not match someone being two centuries old.

“I get that question a lot, you know? Yes, I am really that old, and no, I do not act like a child or a old woman. I just think that my mind also stopped aging somehow. Or maybe it does age, but I just naturally behave like this.” She answered, her voice sounding like she had repeated that many times before.

“Must be nice to be able to live that long. Do you have a secret skin care routine or how did you do that, immortal queen?” I asked her sarcastically, but it only earned me a kick to the shin.

“I know its easy to make jokes like that or to say that you envy me, but believe me, you do *not* want to live that long.” she said with a threatening voice, glaring at me.

*Seems like I hit a nerve there.*

“... Sorry, I did not want to be rude.” I apologized.

She grumbled a bit before she mustered me again like I had done with her before.

“How did you end up with the task of poisoning me, anyway? You seem too young for that.”

I let out a laugh. “Well...”

The back alleys she was guiding me along were small and long, just after a few turns I had completely lost my orientation. *Just how should I explain to her something so unbelievable? Should I just tell her? And what will I do when we get to Gav and Alis? Oh boy, I think I might actually die today at the rate things are going.*

“Oh, two young people around this part at that late hour?” a manly voice said, a shadow stepping out between two buildings, a red glowing spot visible. The red grew in intensity, then it returned back to almost not visible. The figure stepped into the light from a nearby lantern, revealing his gray hair and the brown, heavy mantle he was wearing while smoking a cigarette.

*How cliché. A man making threats in a dark alley and stepping into the light after smoking. What is next? He pulls out a gun? Or rather a crossbow, ha.*

Both Olivia and I had stopped after he said the first words. I was thinking at first he would be just an old man wanting to lecture us, but now that did seem like quite a dangerous situation if he was putting himself like this in our way.

“Shara, I am really sad about this situation. But you knew what would happen if you ever tried to leave, didn’t you?” The man blew the smoke out of his nose, a sad smile on his face.

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I recognized him now. The man before us was the old fart, using the same name for me that Janine, the woman searching for me, had used.

“Is Shara your real name? If that is the case, your parents must really love you...” Olivia whispered. *Eh, that is not important right now, is it?!*

The old fart nodded. “Yes. Sharas father was raising her alone while also working his ass off for our organization, trying to get her the best possible place to work outside of our profession. Wanted to bribe her into apprenticeships that pay well. He would have done everything for her, and in the end he even gave his life to his special little child, entrusting her to me.”

“The broken glasses...” I muttered. The old fart nodded. “Did not think your uncle would notice you keeping them with you all the time, huh?”

*So my old body host did actually have reasons for holding on to it. And if he is the uncle of this body and the father is a dead assassin, it means that whole thing is a family thing and I did not just destroy a happy family by occupying this body. Wait, should I not have thought about something like this even sooner?! Had I been really just thinking about myself all this time? I am the worst...*

“But even if your old man entrusted you to me, I still have to follow the rules. I do not like what I have to do, but you can’t leave the organization like this. And you can’t ignore requests from our master. That were the rules you are never to break, but you openly declared war to me, broke both of those rules and now I find you walking hand in hand with the target you should kill, wearing *glasses*.”

He reached his hand into his mantle, pulling out a revolver.

*Seriously?! He actually does have a gun? Alis, you said they would enforce this rule!*

“I am sorry, Shara. I really am. But there are limits, even for the legendary assassin killing 600 targets in just five years all over the continent. No exceptions.”

“You... murdered so many people?” Olivia asked next to me, going pale. The old man laughed. “That were the *targets* she had killed. But most of the time she

also eliminated the whole family or everyone that could have witnessed her, so the actual number of kills is even greater.” He pointed the revolver at me.

“Is... is this true?” Olivia asked me, taking a step away from me, letting go of my hand. *That is my line! How the hell could that be? This has to be some mistake! This is too crazy to be real!*

“No! That-” I took a step forward to the queen. “That wasn’t me! I am not Shara! I never killed anyone!” I shouted, despairing.

“But you did try to kill me today. Twice!” Olivia countered. She looked sad, taking another step back.

“And I had no other choice! Since the moment I came to this world I was already caught in this whole mess without any way out! Do you think I wanted all of this? Of course not! But those two forced me to poison you!” The old fart slowly cocked the hammer with his thumb, still pointing the barrel at me.

“You... come from another world?” Olivia repeated, her eyes wide open, staring at me with disbelief.

In that moment the old fart pulled the trigger, a gunshot echoing through the alleys.

I groaned, holding my right shoulder. Olivia had thrown herself between me and the gun, but the shot had went right through her and stopped in my shoulder.

*Did the queen just protect me? Why?*

I could feel warm blood trickling out from between the fingers of my left hand. pressing it at the wound. My right arm felt weak and hurt when I tried to move it.

The shock of the pain and the sight of Olivia’s wound starting to bleed let my mind go blank. Olivia, who had taken the bullet through her lungs, was still standing like nothing had happened, her back turned to me, standing between the old fart and me. Only a hole in her dress proving that she had been hit.

“Sorry, *little withered tree*, but I studied your weaknesses. A shot to the heart or to the brain. Wont kill you, but you will be out of the fight for some time. Thank Nero for that leak.” he said, laughing.

“That asshole. Making problems for me even long after his death!” Olivia spat, putting her arms to the side as if to shield me.

The man cocked the hammer again, but before he could fire, I turned around and started to run. I did not even look back, I did not care for Olivia, I did not care for any of that. I just started running, not wanting to die, not wanting to experience more pain, not wanting to be shot.

My shoulder hurt, and with every step and every movement of my limp right arm the wound in my shoulder screamed with pain.

*I left her behind... I ran... left her with him... and he had a weapon... even after she protected me...*

The thoughts ran through my head, failing to process what I had just done, how much of a coward I was. But the panic filling my thoughts still did not stop, making me continue to run away.

I continued running through the alleys, turning around a corner and tripping over the hem of my dress, falling with my face down straight to the ground, unable to catch my fall.

I picked myself up again, ignoring the pain, and tried to tear the hem of my dress with my left hand alone. I failed at first, took a deep breath, and then pulled with all my force again, screaming. A ripping sound could be heard, the dress had torn just like I wanted it to, leaving more space for my legs. I started running again, turning at the next corner. I did not know where I was going, I just wanted to run away from the man because I was scared. Scared of the pain. *Scared of death.*

And just when I wanted to turn around the next corner something went through the inner side of my left thigh and stuck there, dull pain spreading through that leg. Whatever had hit me was still sticking out, causing my right thigh to clash against it, letting me trip over and fall forward again while a splintering sound could be heard from the stuck object, the pain in my left thigh suddenly exploding, letting me scream before my face hit the ground once again.

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I could feel something warm from my nose, my mouth tasted like iron. I rolled on my back, my face turning to the sky. It had started raining while I had been running, teardrops splattering on my glasses. I lifted my upper body up, groaning from the pain in my shoulder. With a grunt I inspected my left thigh. A crossbow bolt was stuck in it, its tail broken off. The burning pain I had felt was from widening the wound the bolt had made in the leg after hitting it with my other thigh. Blood was flowing out, forming a puddle together with the rainwater under my legs.

I tried to move my leg, but the pain was so intense I wanted to scream again. Meanwhile steps were approaching me. "Does it hurt?" a female voice asked me with excitement. Before I could even turn to her, she kicked me, sending me rolling. The world spun around me before I stopped, lying sideways. I tried looking at the one responsible, but my glasses had fallen from my nose. Everything now was once again blurry.

"What is it, Shara? Not feeling so good?" the voice asked me again, coming closer. "It hurts..." I muttered, noticing I had bit my tongue at one point.

"I sure hope it does. Because I *really* want you to experience this pain."

The person was coming closer again, kneeling next to me and grabbing my neck and pulling me to her face. Finally I could see who was attacking me.

“...Janine...” I muttered, recognizing the face.

*First the old fart, now the lady looking for revenge. Just right after the night where I had been forced to try and assassinate someone, almost filling the shoes of my predecessor, almost justifying their hate because I would be no better than her.*

I wanted to laugh at that irony, only that the pain from her kick to my chest stopped me from that, putting a forced smile on my face.

“What are you smiling for, asshole?” she asked me, hitting my face with her fist. “You murdered my family! You did not even spare my son! He was only six! You hear me? Six! What could he have possibly done to you?” She cried with an angry, hitting me again. “The past years I have been searching the whole continent for you! Taking out one assassin after the other! Everyone who could know *something*.” She hit me again. “And I even found the person putting out the contract. You want to know what I did with him?” Her face got closer, her lips twisting into a fear inducing smile. I could feel her breath on my skin when she continued talking. “I tied him to a pole and put him in the swamp, waiting how long it would take until the insects living in those waters would start devouring him.” The smile on her lips grew even bigger. “After two days you could see something moving under his skin while he was screaming in pain, begging to finally be allowed to die.”

I winced, but I could not escape her. My right arm still couldn't move, her foot was standing on my left hand, my bones almost crushing under her weight. When she felt it moving she stomped on it, making me cry out from pain.

“I am shorry! I am shorry! Pleashe don't hurt me!” I screamed, trying not to suffocate from the blood that was running down my throat.

“You are sorry? What?” She stood up, pulling me with her, even though my body was completely limp. “You are *sorry*?” She rammed her fist in my stomach.

“You don't want me to hurt you?” She let go of me, letting me fall to my knees. Just when I thought she would let go of me she grabbed my hair and starting to drag me backwards.

I screamed again, my left hand trying to stop her, tears running down my eyes, but she did not stop until my back hit a wall. “You know, my husband was responsible for the orphanage. He did good work, prioritizing the kids above all else, trying to make them feel as loved as our own kid. And you know *why* you got the contract to kill him? Because your client wanted more money in his pockets. But not only from the post, no, he had already implemented a system to redirect a lot of the money from the funds in his own pockets, letting the orphanage just barely able to run without anyone noticing. That *scum*!”

She put her hand softly on my temple. “I really dreamed a long time about how it would be to take revenge. I wanted you to scream, to suffer, to beg for forgiveness. But honestly, seeing you so pathetic like that... I just want to end you.”

With that she pounded the back of my head against the wall. A dull pain ran through my head, my vision blacked out for a moment.

Suddenly the sound of a gunshot and the sound of something hitting stone and breaking it next to me could be heard.

Janine clicked her tongue and let go of my head. "The old master assassin, head of the trade. If I had not found Shaha first I would be questioning you right now." she said mockingly, spitting on the ground.

"Well, there is really no need to do that now, is there? We even have the same goal today." the old fart replied indifferently.

"Oh, do we? Did he not kill enough innocent bystanders or what is the crime he is accused of?" The woman laughed.

"Not really, that was just her own way of doing things." He clicked his tongue. "I already gave a list with every victim she had killed to the head of the police, including a picture of every identity she ever created. The standard procedure for someone trying to leave us and by tomorrow morning they will be printed in the newspapers." The old fart sighed. "But you know, I would love to end her myself. That is a tradition in our trade. And I kind of *am* responsible for her."

The woman knelt down next to me, her face was visible for me again. "So this boy really is a *girl*, huh? And with that white hair..." she laughed. "How ridiculous. I asked the killer personally if she would know the killer. And she did not even try to kill me after that."

"So? Who of us both will end the suffering for her?" the man asked, readying his pistol. The woman laughed, pulling out her crossbow.

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I opened my eyes again. My body felt wet, it seemed to have started raining while I was out. I forced myself bag on my legs and looked around. The man was gone, but so was Shima. Or should I call him Shara? *Never mind, that's not important now.*

I looked down on me, noticing two new holes in my dress. It had been my favorite dress since Julius and Shaha died, and I had always at least five of the same kind in my closet. *Why? Because it had a sentimental value to me. And because I lost more than I could count. Fire, swords, floating face up in the ocean for days, being impaled, losing my limbs, being hit by lightning, a beast the size of the house hitting me with his claws... ugh, I don't want to remember most of those times.*

I started running the way I had come with Shima. This was the only way she could have gone.

That man had called her an assassin, having murdered *hundreds* of people. I originally just wanted to meet with her friend who tried to destroy this country, trying

to find out why he would do something like that and how fruitful his efforts have been. While I did not expect him to tell me anything, rather anticipating he would try to hurt me, I knew they were only human. I wanted to reach out, give them the chance to talk and negotiate. A naive way of thinking, I knew that. But I had nothing to lose and pain meant nothing to me anymore. There was nothing I could lose and I wanted to give them a chance before things would escalate.

If I would not try it, no one could, so it was the best use for my body.

But for now I had a new goal. That girl said she had come from another world, and if that was true, she *had* to know something about *him*.

*I needed her, no matter what! I wont let you disappear once again, Ade!*

At the next junction I instinctively turned the way we had not come from, thinking that that would be what she most likely would have done. The problem was after that. Where should I start to look?

This part was on the outer walls from the keep, and since that outer part was never planned to be walled up the architects created these narrow alleys. If soldiers would storm into the city from outside the main roads they could easily be defended by just a few men. But that *also* meant that there were a lot of places she could be. I stopped at the next junction, clicking my tongue. "Ade..." I muttered. If he was active again, maybe he would help me to protect his new toy. But, much to my disappointment, no one appeared. "You useless god!" I cursed at him. He had broken his promise to me already, but well, it also kind of might have been my fault, too. I thought he had tricked me, only for it to turn out that someone else had tricked him. Someone so strong she could trick a *god*.

I clicked my tongue again, still standing at the junction. Decisions never had been a strong point of mine, and now that I could not even help that self proclaimed person from another world I felt really annoyed at myself once again.

"Shima!" I screamed with all the strength I could muster, but no one answered. *Four minutes if someone destroys my heart*. Not really that long of a time, but in situations like these, every second mattered.

A gunshot rang trough the air. My heart stopped for a moment, but I could not despair.

*Maybe there was still hope. Maybe he did miss again.*

I started running the way I had heard the shot from as fast as I could.

*Please, please be alive!*

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It did not take long for me to find them following the sound the shot had come from. I could see three people on a small plaza. The man with the gun, Shima and the

back of a woman I had never seen before. She was holding her side with one arm, covering a bleeding hole she had in her flank. But she was not the only one hurt, the man with the gun had an bolt in his right arm, forcing him to hold the gun in the left hand.

And between them was Shima, lying on the ground with his back to the wall. There was a big puddle of blood on the ground around her, most of it coming from the bolt sticking in her thigh. Her face was swollen, the black hair was turning white in the rain. *What happened here?*

I unconsciously reached for the jawbone in my pocket, thinking about saving her. *Should I really use the weapon used to murder so many people to kill even more? No. That thing already caused enough deaths already.*

I let go of the jaw and instead removed the glove from my right hand, revealing my hand that had transformed into something inhuman the moment I had become this abomination.

The human hand I had before had turned into something with brown scales and long claws on each finger, each of them sharp enough to tear through flesh like butter. I had never been trained to fight since I was raised as a noble princess, my only education dedicated to being a wife of a king and bear an heir to him. Since then I *did* have a few fights, but all those times I had been protected or relied on being immortal. But this time it was different. This time *I* had to protect someone and the old man knew of my weaknesses only Nero had ever figured out by chance.

Still, I had to do *something*.

I put a step forward, observing the two people fighting over Shima for a moment before I made a desperate plan.

After taking a deep breath I started running at the old man as fast as I could, ignoring the woman I passed. I tried to show him my shoulder and my sides while I covered my head and my heart, trying to be as hard to hit as possible. The man noticed me a tad late, but his reaction still turned to be out instantly.

He pulled the trigger, trying to aim at my chest. The moment I saw his finger move I turned a bit more to the side, the sound of a gunshot following. I could feel the bullet pass right through my arm, penetrating my chest and the right lung, barely scrapping by my heart and my spine and finally stopping somewhere behind the left lung. Ignoring the pain I continued rushing at him and tore with my claws through the arm holding the weapon. He screamed and let it go, but I was not finished yet. I caught the gun, pulling back that metal lever on its back just like the man had done and pointed it at the woman while a bolt flew by my face, only barely missing me.

"Seems like we have a stalemate." the man behind me said, chuckling. I glanced at him, he was still holding his heavily bleeding arm, both of them useless now. I returned my gaze to the woman who had stopped in the middle of reloading the



crossbow.

*Times had definitely been easier when people only fought with swords and spears.*

"I don't care. I want my revenge on her, and I won't stop until I kill her." the woman said

I stayed silent, slowly moving before Shima without letting those two out of my eyes. "That girl is mine." I finally said after reaching my desired position.

Looking at his bleeding hand the man shrugged his shoulder, letting out a big sigh. "Whatever, do what you want with her. I am in no position to fight anymore. And tomorrow her life will be forfeit anyway." With that he just turned around and left without looking back.

Only the woman stayed behind, her arms slightly moving. She tried to reload the crossbow with slow movements so I would not notice. *How troublesome.*

"So you protect her, huh?" She spat out. "Do you know what she did?" I nodded. The man had told us before he shot my heart.

"Well, then you know what monster she is. And I want to end this monster. I want to kill her just as she killed my child and my husband. She took my family, taking away everything I loved!"

Her face twisted in rage. "She destroyed it all, without even feeling any remorse. And the moment she experiences some pain she starts begging to be spared, like she is some kind of victim here!"

"I still need her alive. I am sorry for your loss, but please give up on it for now." I said to her, my voice cold. I would not let the chance pass to find Ade.

The rain got heavier, the woman was still moving her hand slowly.

"Even if you shoot me with that crossbow, I won't die. I will just stand up a second later like nothing happened."

"And you think I would believe that?" she spotted.

"You should, because I am queen Olivia Rothwin. And I think I have seen you at the ball today, sneaking into the VIP area while I was holding my speech and secretly talking with Theodore Westground during your dance with him later on."

*It has been a while since I introduced myself like this.*

"Well, I can't deny that." She admitted with a smile. "And I really would not want to turn my weapon on a queen,," she continued, now pulling the string back.

"But you see, I would give up everything to kill the murderer of my family and I will not stop for anyone. Not even for the queen." She pointed her loaded crossbow at me.

*I should pull the trigger. Yet I still hesitate.*

*Is the girl behind me really worth it? Is she really worth it to kill someone for her, even if she could lead me to Ade? Would it really be okay for me to pursue my own goals like this after everything I had done?*

My hand clenched tighter around the gun in my hand, my hand starting to shake a bit. Desperation and hesitation gripped my heart, making me waver.

But when I saw how her aim was slightly off, like she was aiming at something behind me, I reflexively pulled the trigger without thinking. My hand kicked back from the recoil, the gun hitting my forehead. The gunshot landed in her shoulder with the arm that was holding the crossbow. Having no time to aim I just had prayed it would not kill her and it seemed that it had worked. Her crossbow fell out of her limp hand into a puddle with a splash.

I went closer to her and kicked her crossbow away. "You should go see a healer." I told her, turning back again and returning to Shima, ignoring the dull headache I had.

"There are no healers anymore..." the woman on the ground groaned, her face twisted in anger. "Those are called doctors these days."

*Maybe I should visit more than just the palace and orphanage in the future.*

*If I was that behind in times Shima had been right to call me a shut in.*

*...Ugh, sorry Lina. If you watch me from above, you surely will be angry at me. But I miss your lectures, so give me everything you have if we ever meet again.*

\*\*\*

Every part of my body was still hurting and felt wet, even with my eyes open I could only see either the darkness of the night or the lamps glowing in the night. There were no other details than Olivias face above me I could make out.

*She was carrying me like a princess. Honestly, I would complain if I had the strength left, since I still was a boy at heart. Getting carried like this from someone even smaller than you felt weird. Yet my heart had skipped a beat when she arrived, and then she even placed herself before me once more, challenging the two all alone, saving me just in time, almost like in a movie.*

*She had become my white prince. And now with her so close to me I had noticed something. My heart was racing. The feeling of joy I had when she decided to stay with me, the way she reached out to me when I was on the street... I knew what it was. I had it before. And now I felt it again, even though I was convinced I would never be able to ever feel like this ever again.*

"Olivia..." I wanted to speak to her, but I only managed a whisper. "Yes?" She said, looking at me. I could see her eyes. They were like those of those Nagas. Her pupils were formed to a vertical line, the iris brown. *Had she also been a demi human? I never noticed. Or is it just my eyes?*

"If you have nothing to say, shut up. We will be at your friends house soon." she said, looking annoyed. "No... I wanted to say something." I smiled at her, closing my eyes. "Thank you. Really. I have decided... to make you my *heroine*."

“A what? What is that supposed to be?” she asked, tilting her head, but I stayed silent at her question. Instead of answering I just leaned my head at her chest, closing my eyes, enjoying the warmth of another human being for the first time after years. *So it really is okay if it is her. I am sure now of my decision. Even if the possibilities for it to work out are zero.*

\*\*\*

She was still carrying me like a princess when we arrived at the door of those two terrorists. Honestly, I did not know if bringing Olivia to this place was a good idea, and I really questioned if me returning here would actually *not* get me killed, especially after I led the person I was supposed to kill here.

But sadly I just had no other options. If what the old fart had said is true, starting tomorrow I would be a wanted criminal with everyone knowing my face. Olivia could bring me to a doctor, but she could also just bring me directly into a jail cell, the death row waiting for me.

*Also I asked her if she could do something for me, with, you know, being queen and everything. You would think a person with such a grand title would have power, right? Turns out she can't do that. And not only that, she was not even sure that she would do it for me even if she could! I could understand her decision after what had the old fart had told us, but at least she decided to trust me for some reason for the time being.*

“Weird, the car standing here has still its key inside. Are they planning to leave soon?” Olivia muttered, looking around before she started knocking on the door.

“You are late.” Said a voice behind the door after a minute, followed by the sound of heavy locks being removed before the door finally opened.

*They say a third time is the charm. But honestly, is that a running gag to tell me that I am late today?*

A very angry looking Gav was standing there, looking at me like trash that somehow got back to his door after being thrown out.

“How much of an idiot are you?” he asked me, ignoring the person carrying me. “Let me explain!” I forced out, my tongue hurting after I had bit on it when that woman had kicked me.

“What is there to explain? You had one job. Kill the queen. And what do you do? You bring her to our hideout! Alive! Carrying you for everyone to see, ending up heavily wounded. What part of that outcome is something you can explain *without* sounding like a complete moron?”

Olivia cleared her throat. “You know, I can hear you.” Only now Gav spared her a look, his gaze getting even less welcoming. “I sure hope

you heard it and take my words to heart, fulfilling us our heartfelt wish and just drop dead on the spot. Because just you standing here means that it does not matter anymore if I do or do not say it, anyway.” *Okay, Gav was really pissed.*

“She stabbed herself... with the jaw. But she did... not die. She is the real deal.” I explained him.

Now his gaze was getting even worse. It was just short of the lunatic hatred Janine had shown me before.

“Come in. We cant let any more people see you.” he said, turning around and closing the door behind us. It got tiring to keep my eyes open, so I closed them, enjoying the peaceful black world I was now in. the warmth of the room now embracing my cold and wet body.

“What the... Shima! What happened!” came a scream from above me, and soon I could hear something heavy being dropped and bare feet running down the stairs. Alis probably was concerned about my body.

*Not me, my body, I was sure about that.*

“I was shot... twice. And some... beatings...” I said to her without opening my eyes, forcing a smile on my face. Somehow I felt tired. It had been a long day; the nervousness after I tried to poison the queen, the way she forced me to come with her, the beating... *and then being protected by Olivia.*

“Olivia...” I whispered, the sleepy feeling getting stronger, trying to take me.

“Thank you...” I forced out.

And then the drowsiness just washed over me, letting me pass out, still in Olivias arms while Alis was still panicking over my wounds, shouting my name.

\*\*\*

*Only to wake up to shouting again.*

I was sitting on some seat, my upper body vertical. I opened my eyes, trying to see where I was, only to be greeted by blurriness. But the things I could see did look like the inside of a car.

And I could hear voices shouting outside together with the sound of rain.

“What do you mean you will just dispose of her? Only because her uncle wants to kill her?” that was the voice from Olivia.

“No, but because she has somehow told the assassins that he left the White Tail. Do you even know what happens in that case? Us killing him is a mercy!” screamed Gav.

“I will not let you kill her until I get my answers!” Olivia screamed back.

“The only way to get him to survive is bringing him to a doctor. The bolt in his thigh has hit an artery and I would bet that it is barbed. Right now it is blocking the blood

from flowing out, but that will not hinder him from dying of blood loss soon if nothing is done. But I agree we cannot let you bring him there, the risk for us is too high.” That was Alis.

“I will guarantee you that she will not talk about what you did. Just please, I need her!” protested Olivia, her voice pleading.

“You just told us that you have no actual power anyway, and now you want to make promises like that? And that *after* he had already told you everything? Do you actually think we would be that stupid, or are you just an idiot like Shima?” A short pause followed. “But fine, lets pretend you take him to a doctor. He will get some emergency treatment, saving his life. But before the dawn of day he will be sitting in jail, waiting for his execution after being given the death sentence after just a few hours.”

“But if you treat him here? I mean, you do seem to have the equipment. And if you broke into the safe of the international bank, you surely also got the healing stones. Did you also get rid of them? Or do you hide them here?” Olivia still protested.

“Because of Shima we actually have to move out now. We do not have any time to treat him, since we have been seen with him. And we already *did* use one of those stones on him, the two stones we had left you can consider gone.” said Alis, her voice growing cold.

“So... you really want to either let him die or kill him yourself? Is that it? After he even actually did carry out both of your missions?” Olivia sounded... hurt. Desperate.

“We already told him he was disposable. And also I told him that we are not heartless monsters and would not forget someone who helped us. But all he did today was destroying our homes, messing up our plans and even bringing the enemy straight to us. And that after we did care for him since he lost his memories. How long should we continue saving his sorry ass?” Alis sounded really hurt.

*Why did this feel so familiar? Why is it almost the same it had been in my past life?*

*Why did I always end up losing everything time and time again?*

*Why?*

\*\*\*

I had told those *friends* of Shima everything that happened since the start of the ball.

The woman was trying her best treating her wounds, despairing at the broken bolt in Shima’s leg and the amount of blood she was losing. But after I finished, the blond boy stood up without saying anything, getting a crossbow from somewhere under the table and pointed it at Shima.

Of course I protested. I tackled him away, taking her back on my arms and carried her to the car, putting her on the passenger seat, ignoring the crossbow bolts penetrating my back.

I was lucky since they missed my heart, but those one handed crossbows they were using did seem to be pretty inaccurate anyway.

After I had placed her in the car I tried to reason with them again, but they shot down everything I said, leaving me no chance but to try to force my way out. They had good reason to do so, but Shima may be the only one who could help me.

Ade had already brought someone here from another world once before. He left her to wake up in an egg, having to fend for herself for quite some time until he suddenly showed up, teaching her the language of her tribe and ended up kind of guiding her.

At her deathbed she told me to call for him if I would ever need him, as if she had foreseen my inability to die by then. Julius did question it in the end, as I had not grown any older by then, but still we had thought I would only age slower after drinking that liquid. It was not until many years later, after I had been standing heartbroken at the deathbed of my very own daughter that I found out I could not die, no matter how often I cut my left wrist open. And no matter how much I tried, in the end I had to call Ade, and do so for quite some while until he showed up, promising me *“an end for my story”*.

*Only for him to break that promise, disappearing without a trace when everything went haywire. And now I find out someone else might have been brought here.*

*I will get you, you stupid god. And for that I need that girl, need her to tell me everything, maybe even to talk to him in my stead. She must know something.*

“Still! I still need to save her! I need her, alive!” I begged the two of them, but they continued pointing their crossbows at me.

I looked down, fear taking hold of me. I did not think those two would change their minds any time soon, and the longer I would try to talk with them, the less likely was the chance of Shima surviving, leaving me no choice.

I pointed the gun in my hand at Alis. I had taken it with me, even though I knew it only had one shot left after checking the cylinder.

“Being invincible is unfair, you know?” the blond boy said, looking very troubled. “You can just do whatever you want, and no one can do anything against it. Maybe that also means that you might have forgotten something, and that is the pleasure of death being a threat.”

I groaned. His way of arguing reminded me too much of Nero.

“You said the guild would be almost twice as old as you are. And with you just shrugging off those arrows we shot you with I am starting to believe you, even though I do not know how you do that.” He laughed, mustering me intensively.

“You know, I think being so scared of dying that you just do not do something because it could kill you is just plain boring. But the opposite of it too. What is the sense in experiencing it when you know that nothing could happen anyway? What is the sense in living like this? Where is the fun? The risk? The thing that *could* go wrong, but does not, and you will spend the rest of your life thinking how it could have happened, but you survived, all while smiling when telling everyone about it?” Gav continued.

“I am not here to discuss something like that.” I said, staring at him. “But that is the problem. I am sure someone as invincible as you just won't know the thrill of death. Or would even think in the logic of other creatures seeking it, trying to experience it, walking the thin line between staying alive and death.”

He had a smile on the lips, but his eyes did not it. “I believe I do quite understand all of that to a degree. Maybe even better than you would think.” I said, my voice growing cold. They would try something, any moment.

And, just like I predicted, Gav started moving. He threw his crossbow at me, hitting my shoulder with it, and started running at me while my arm was swaying. Out of reflex I pointed my gun at him, but his past words shot through my head, leading me to a split second decision.

I pointed the pistol back at Alis, seeing his smile fade while Alis shot her crossbow the same moment I shot my gun, this time controlling the recoil.

My shot hit her in the solar plexus, the bolt she had shot at me completely missing its mark, penetrating the door of the car.

Gav, who had been trying to tackle me, ready to be wounded by my pistol, had stopped just before reaching me, staring at Alis, the blood on the ground around her getting more by the second.

“Alis...” he muttered, going pale at the sight. “You can still save her, just use one of those healing stones you stole. And please, do not get in my way. I have been experiencing the thrill of death much more than you could ever imagine.”

\*\*\*

Olivia jumped on the driver seat, slamming the door behind her shut. I had heard a gunshot, but keeping my eyes open got more difficult with time. Not that I would have seen anything, anyway. Also I had lost the ability to see colors for now, since everything seemed black and white for me right now, even the golden embroidery on her dress.

“Did you... kill them...? ” I asked her, anxious at the answer. They might have wanted to kill me just before and threw me to the wolves, being terrorists and all. But

I still had spent time with them the last month and Alis *did* care for me in some twisted way. To say I would not feel anything would be just a plain lie.

“No, but if the guy does not have the healing stones he stole, the woman will die.”

She reached for the ignition and started the car with the second try.

“Did you... drive before?” I asked her, as she seemed to be trying to figure out how to accelerate. “I did drive a carriage before. I also rode on horses.”

*We are doomed.*

She found the accelerator, pressing it down, the car jumping and flying forwards with force, pressing us into our seats.

“Did you... see... Gav getting... the stone?” I continued, trying to not think about what could go wrong after her answer.

“No, I did not. But he ran inside the house after I told him to use one of them.”

I nodded. He would get them. He always seemed to care about her, even though he appeared harsh, so if he was leaving her alone when her life was in danger, it would be to save her.

I started to relax, putting my chin up, listening to the sound of the car driving full speed without braking through the city, being thrown a bit to the left and right from rapid turns she made.

“You know...” I started, gathering all my strength I had in me. “Those two... were right. It would have been... better... if they had killed me.”

“What do you want to tell me with that?” Olivia sounded annoyed. *Maybe she was looking for the brakes?*

“Just let me... die.” I closed my eyes, turning my head up. “I do not... want to... disappoint the next person. Not become... a burden again.” My tongue was still hurting, I was getting cold, still I could feel myself sweat.

“And what do you want to *exactly* tell me with that? That I should just let you die after I tried so hard to save you?” Olivia asked me with slight anger in her voice.

“Why... are you trying... to do that... anyway? You heard what the... man said. So... why? Why... go so far for me?”

She clicked her tongue. “Because you said you are from another world.”

My mind went blank for a minute, after that I started to laugh, even though it sounded more like coughing in the end. “So... you believe me? It must sound... crazy. So... Why...?”

A long silence followed, only filled by the sound of the engine and the shaking of the car. Only after a long time she finally answered. “Because... I am grasping for straws. And I need some answers from you, so please... survive.”

She let out a deep sigh, followed by clicking from some levers in the car.

“Anyway, do you know how to use the brake in these cars? I tried every button and lever, but I cant find it.” she asked me, sounding slightly panicked.



“Pull the... steering wheel.” I said to her, reminded how I had been in a similar situation before.

“Seriously?! You *pull* the steering wheel? What kind of stupid system is that?!” she shouted angrily.

“I... totally get... you...” I said, getting unconscious again. That may have been in relation with the squealing tires followed by a crashing sound I could have heard shortly before I fell in unconsciousness, but I did not remember clearly.

*Maybe that was for the best.*

\*\*\*

After flying around a corner with squealing tires I attempted desperately to brake the car, pulling the wheel as hard as I could. But my foot was still pressing down hard on the accelerator without me noticing and us driving downhill on a wet street did not help to stop the car any sooner.

The car started to spin, the backside of our car slamming into another car parked on the sideway before it stopped. “What a stupid system...” I muttered, trying to calm my breath and cursing the person designing that brake.

I took a look at the girl next to me. Her red dress had looked wonderful on her, but now her black hair had gone white, her makeup was smeared over her face, her mouth and nose were bloody and the expensive looking red dress torn up and drenched in blood and dirt.

“My car! My car!” someone screamed outside, clutching his hands above his head. *Good, now I did not need to ring him out of his bed.*

I opened the door and got out, earning his angry stare until he noticed who had been driving. “Majesty?” He asked, unsure if it was really me.

“Yes, its me. Also I need your help. *Now.*” I replied, pointing at the girl in the car.

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“I’m *not* a doctor!” he protested, preparing a saw and bandages anyway. “I am sure you can do it, Shozzo. Because I can go nowhere else with her.” I said, waving him off. He took out a needle and thread out of a drawer, muttering something about it hopefully being enough. “I just need you to do something so she does not die immediately.” I said, shrugging my shoulders.

“So you say, but to do that is saving her anyway. And I’m telling you, I am a scholar, not a doctor! And one for optics and lenses at that!” he still protested, starting to disinfect the needle and a pincer over a candle. “Also I do not have any blood reserves and both of us are unable to donate any blood to her biologically, not

that we even would know her blood group. And with the rate it is going she will bleed out!”

I shrugged my shoulders. “I would say it does not look *that* bad. The shot on her shoulder had already stopped bleeding twenty minutes ago and the blood dripping from the broken bolt also has gone back.”

“That either means she has not much of it left or some of the blood clogged and that is saving her. But with her pale skin I would tend to say its the former.” He said, putting the needle and pincer on a tissue and approached her leg with the saw.

“With her skin already looking like that even before she lost blood I think its fifty fifty chance.” I said, crossing my arms.

He started sawing off the broken end of the bolt, trying to not move it too much in her leg. “You could help, you know?” he said, sweat forming on his forehead. “With that hand? You jest.” I said, waving my right hand.

He sighed and started to go with a tissue over the sawed of end, making the bloody wooden stump wet with water he had boiled before. “Why are you sawing off the broken end anyway?” I asked, but he only shook his tail. “I do not know which bolt was used. If it is barbed, which is *very* likely considering the sketchiness of this situation, I need to push it out the other side. And I do not want to leave any splinters in her body while doing that. And don’t get me started about the artery that had been hit. Honestly, I am not sure if I can do this. Or if *anyone* could do it, really.”

He took some bandage and pressed it around the the bolt, forcing it through her leg with one strong push. Shortly after the bloody was lying next to him on a tissue, but blood had started flowing out again, more than before.

“Dammit.” the man muttered at the sight, wiping his forehead, trying to stop her bleeding somehow. “Please get more disinfectant. And some more thread. Also I need every bandage you can get. And an belt from my wardrobe at the other end of the workshop, get that one first. Hurry.”

“After that there is still the shoulder.” I reminded him, getting on my way to bring the things he had requested.

*This might become a long night.*

\*\*\*

“Shit shit shit!” I screamed, pressing the stone at Alis solar plexus. It had started shining and closed the wound, but she still was pale, showing no signs of waking up.

And even if she did, would she also have lost her memory like that moron? I could live with that if I would not lose her. But her surviving was the priority.

*Maybe this would not have happened if I just had let that idiot die on that truck!*

“Come on! Alis! Please wake up! I need you! Without you I will be alone!” I shouted, shaking her. I despaired, the thought alone of losing her was just too much. *I had gambled my life, but I almost had lost hers. She was the last family I had and I would do everything to protect her, even if it would mean to take on the whole world. At least that was what I told myself all the time. But I had failed already since we ended up here.*

*What bullshit that has been. If you are past ten years old you have to be lucky to get a free place, only getting an apprenticeship if someone dies who had taken one?*

*This whole system is just crazy! The people go around, praising this guild all the time, ignoring those people at the bottom trying to survive after being forced out of the system! They all are egoistic, never looking over their own plate, all of them!*

That system led to most orphans arriving at the orphanage being under ten years old, the only exception being the few coming from death in their family, just like we both did. Forcing us to live there, which was not that bad. But the wait in those year had been bad, knowing what we would have to do after we turned eighteen.

We had decided that we would stay together, no matter what. *Well, I did. And it was only Alis selling her body and protecting me, saying I should just leave her behind. But knowing what she had to do, seeing how the other people working for us got treated by those customers... how could I not hate it? How could I ever abandon her like that? How could I not despise this whole thing, fighting to take it down? Destroy this system that hurt my sister each and every day again?*

*But Alis seemed well, and she ended up telling me it was fun for her and that it was not that bad. But I am sure that she is only saying that for my sake, pretending that everything is fine, so I wont worry about her.*

Unsure what else I could do with Alis body lying before me, her breath flat and unsteady, I took her in my arms, holding her like a princess. She seemed so light, yet she was the older one of us, always caring for those around her, trying to save as many as she could. She was amazing. My amazing big sister.

*Protecting me after I always talked so big about protecting her.*

I closed my eyes for a moment, holding back the tears in my eyes. Because of me she had almost lost her life, and even with that magic stone she did not seem fully healed.

I took a big breath and forced myself to focus on my situation again.

*Tomorrow there will be news about every misdeed the assassin we had hired together with her face and every name or identity she had ever used, exposing her to the public and forcing her to flee for the rest of her life.*

*If she survives the night, that is.*

*And, since she had been seen here, they would of course come here, interrogating us, and we could not have that.*

With only Alis in my arms I left for our secret hideout I had prepared for the case something would happen, giving an order to a male prostitute to burn our house .  
*Just you wait, sis. I almost lost you just now, but your little brother will destroy this messed up system for you.*  
*I promise!*

\*\*\*

With both of my arms being useless I stumbled further through the alley. Both of those crazy women had gotten me good, even if it was not life threatening yet.  
*I wish I could have brought this to an end tonight, but sadly, that was not an option anymore. I waited for her outside after turning in the documents and cut of their way after they entered the valley. I almost had her, but I fear I cannot gather the resolve to do this again. I know what she did to her father, but I still took care of her. And I still wanted to protect her, disobey those orders.*

I looked at the X consisting of two Nagas inside my jacket. It was the symbol for the master of the assassins, the second highest position, right after the madam. I would have loved for Shara to take that position, for her to not continue at this rate she was going at, fearing that she might self destruct with the way she took all the dangerous jobs. Well, it was too late now. The dice had been cast and I had a duty to fulfill, no matter how much I lamented it. *Maybe there was a way...*

I leaned against the wall, watching the dark clouds above me. *Too bad my arms are useless with those injuries. I would love a smoke right now, no matter how bad it is for me.*

\*\*\*

“Hold still, you lost too much blood.” the doctor scolded me, holding me down. “Let me go! I will kill that bitch!” I screamed, angry that I could not finish her then and there.

“I will *not* let you go, and you know why. You fell unconscious already *twice* in my clinic. If you go out now you will die before you even find her again.” the doctor protested, and I had to admit he was right.

But still, if her identity would leak in a few hours. I had to hurry, be the first one to catch her, or I could never revenge my family.

“I need you to stay in here for the next few days. I know that you want to go out as soon as possible, but you are not in the condition to do that. And after what you have told me, the girl wont be either, so calm your horses, Janine.”

I gritted my teeth. "I already feel better, so why should I?" I asked him, glaring at him. He calmly returned my gaze without even flinching. "Because I would inform the police about the location of the one responsible for the disappearing people all over the city that stood between you and your target."

I clicked my tongue. I knew he was on my side and he only wanted to help me, but after almost reaching my goal today I was still pretty pissed. I was going to murder that girl, and I had already discarded everything I had to do so. Killing her was the last thing left for me, the only goal I had. And after that I could finally go see my family in heaven.

"Fine." I finally said, crossing my legs over and leaning back on the chair.

"I will wait a bit."

*And hope I would get as lucky as I had been today, finding the assassin master after that that ball and then follow him into the valleys, getting lost and just stumble over her...*

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"Theodore Westground, was it really a good decision to let Shara go together with queen Olivia Rothwin?" the agent dressed as an servant asked me just after the two of them went out of the throne hall.

I nodded. "Yes. After that quite interesting gathering of special people tonight I am sure we can purge all of them at once in the coming days." My agents running the black market selling alcohol and drugs had been running all over the city and collecting information on who had been responsible for the bank robbery, and what we had found turned out to be quite interesting.

*The assassins wanting to kill each other. The lunatic hunting one of those assassins. The terrorists that stole the gold. All of them connected, their spies and people corrupting every important office. If I could crush all of them and get a purge on their agents in the same time, I could get rid of them at once, stabilizing the united nations again, even if I have to give up one of the most efficient assassins for that.*

*But it would probably best to bring Olivia back to the playing field. She could be useful for the aftermath I will have to face soon.*

I leaned back on the throne, scratching my chin.

*In the best case I can keep the White Tail hidden and active, but we will see about that. But even if they are gone, I still have the collars around the leaders of the other districts, so I should be fine.*

*As long as I continue to play king and keep the peace around the world, Olivia will be backing me up. Just like you wanted, father. I will do you proud and clear our name!*

## 7: Against All Odds

I was dreaming of my past. In the last hundred years dreaming had become something I rarely experienced, but today I *did* dream about something I experienced in the past. And a painful memory at that.

Together with Gervaise I was staying in a keep in the desert we had captured a few days ago, trying to save as many people as we could. But still we had caused a lot of deaths under the civilians living here. The slaver fraction defending it had been on the losing side and Nero knew it. So he had forced everyone, the men, the women and the children without exceptions, to wear the slave collars, bending everyone with them to his will. And so all of them had become soldiers for him, defending the city while his troops went out, leaving us with the gruel decision what to do with them.

In the end the will to save the lives of those we tried to protect had forced us to attack them, seeing how they were not even able to eat or drink with the orders they had been given. We tried to destroy their collars and spare their lives, but while most were located on the neck, making it already a very dangerous place to slash with a sword, others had them on one of their limbs, hidden under clothes.

Since I could not be killed I was at the front, letting the people stab and shoot me, trying desperately to save as many as I could, but in the end the number of victims still was far too high. Seeing all the children and infants in the mass grave we dug after the fight had been one of the worst memories of my life.

But now, after most of our army had left the keep to chase the main force of the slaver fraction, Gervaise, a boy from a neighboring country I had been forced to marry for political reasons, remained together with me in the castle.

But that turned out to be a mistake after an army was heading here from the northeast, a region they said could not be entered. But they had entered it, and they surprised us, coming down here, breaking through our forces and recapturing the keep, trapping the main force going for their capital from two sides, giving them an advantage.

“Gervaise, run and get to safety. I will stay here and kill their leader.” I said to the boy. We had been together for a bit more than a year now, but our relationship, even though we had been married, was not that of a wife and husband due to our own interests.

Instead we had become something more akin to siblings, him being the big brother and me the little sister. I really was not happy with that roles of big and little, but I had

to admit that he always protected me, even if I would never tell him that.

“No! You already told me what Nero did with you the last time he got a slave collar on you! Do you think I could let that happen again?” He shouted, going pale at my suggestion. But I smiled, hugging him. And when I let go of him, I presented him the slave collar he had hidden in his pocket. “Put this on my arm. If I wear this, he cant make a slave out of me until he notices it. I can use that against him.”

He gritted his teeth, wanting to protest at both the fact I knew he still had it and me proposing something like this. But the fighting sounds were already approaching the keep, and soon we both would be trapped. “I will come back to safe you, so please, be careful.” He said after some hesitation, putting the collar on my upper arm. I put my dress back above it, effectively hiding it. “Goodbye. Until next time.” I smiled at him. He nodded and ran out while I hid in the closet, holding my breath.

Only after half a day, when the soldiers were inspecting every crook and canny, I was discovered from a soldier and detained in the room until their leader came. .Nero entered the room, His bright red hair with brown eyes, a red stubble beard and slim figure had not changed after the past few years ago when I met him first.

He looked like a fragile man, but I knew what a despicable man he was and how low he would steep in the blink of an eye, no matter his mood, enjoying the pain he could inflict before he would just continue as nothing had happened.

He opened his belt, removing his sword and throwing it on the bed, only his hunting knife still hanging around his chest. He sat down on the wooden table, looking in my direction while he waved out the soldiers that had detained me.

“Brave of you to stay behind. Or did you just miss the opportunity?” he asked disinterested.

I slowly approached him, forcing myself to start breathing once more after meeting him again. Nero kept sitting on his chair, his hand telling me I should sit down opposite of him.

“Princess.” He said, still looking at me, mustering me. I did the same with him, noticing that he looked tired and pale, his breathing sounding weird.

I gave him my coldest stare.

“Yes, the very princess that you already had once. The very princess you wanted to sell of to the Westground family.” I said, not hiding my emotions. He smiled, but it seemed weak. “Your family did execute all of them after you got back. A sad thing, they always had paid good money and bought so many slaves from us. Especially the young always got us a high price.” He laughed.

“They had it coming, it had not been the first thing they angered me. Much like you did with killing my friends. Or smashing my head so hard I had lost all my precious memories of the past for two years. Or starting a war involving the whole world. And

let us not even start with the civilians in this city and the surrounding villages you had forced to fight for you, including the children.”

He laughed even more. He just laughed at this, not even feeling any remorse, just feeling amused by the very fact I was mad about it. And before I knew it, the hunting knife that hung from his chest was suddenly before my right eye, almost touching it.

“But now that you are here I can continue where we left.” He said, a crazy grin on his face. I took the collar he was holding out to me without protest and put it around my neck, knowing how he would torture me if I would try to resist.

“I am sorry, but after you stomped on my head until it had fused with the ground I forgot how to read the language you had forced me to learn.”

“Oh, a shame. But that can wait. I need you to go back to the main army heading north east and tell them you had to escape and did not meet me. Insist that you heard from an official that we would station ourselves in this canyon here-” he pointed on a point on the map on the table he had rolled out. “And let them wait there for a day, three days from now.” he said, trying to use me as a tool now I was wearing the collar.

But I stayed put, smiling at him until he lost his nerves. “What... how?” he asked, his face going pale. He stood up, approached me. “I gave you an order, slave!” he shouted while kicking me in the solar plexus. I fell from the chair, but I started laughing. “I got immune to those things, you know?” I touched the collar around my neck, stretching my tongue out. He stared at me, anger in his eyes, the first time someone had disobeyed him in a long time, filling him with rage and anger-

but then he just started laughing again, the anger disappearing from his eyes. “Okay, okay, I see. I cant control you, and I cant kill you. And now you are going to kill me, am I right?” He stated, not stopping to laugh. “I could call for my men, but you will be faster. Only that... even if you kill me now, even if you defeat our army-” he stopped laughing, now looking at me, a wide grin on his face. “I will win anyway. I played with the fire and I got burned. But I will use that glimmering ash of my death for an even greater fire that will engulf the world!”

He approached me, smiling, his arms spread out as if he wanted to hug me. “I am going to kill you now, Nero.” I said to him, standing up. But he only snickered, still coming closer. And when he was in reach, I rammed the claws on my hand in his neck, blood running down my arm. But he still smiled, and continued to do so even after the light in his eyes went out and his body went limp, falling down.

“I did it...” I murmured, standing still, looking at the dead man impaled on my hand. *But it was as he said. He had already won. And I just played into his hands. Bastard!*



I woke up, my breath ragged, but I still felt tired. I did not need sleep, I did not sweat, every wound healed in seconds, my stamina seemed unlimited... but I still was human inside. And that nightmare... it was haunting me to this day.

I took a look around, standing up from the stone coffin I had been lying on. "Shaa Rothwin" it said, one of the foolish twins that had made this whole mess worse in the end, but still earning its place here by being of my bloodline.

I took a look at the girl with white hair lying next to the coffin, peacefully snoring after barely surviving last night.

I sighed and took out my necklace, grabbing the key hanging from it, next to the broken and encased tooth that had once been a part of Shaha. Careful to not make much noise I went outside of the mausoleum, getting a few things we would need for both of us, using the hood of my robe to cover my face while doing so.

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I woke up, feeling pain in every part of my body. I groaned, opening my eyes and finding myself somewhere I could not recognize. There where stone walls to my left and right, the room being dark and the air stale.

"Oh, finally awake?" a voice asked me, I recognized it as the one from Olivia. "Yes." I said, trying to stand up, only to give up after I noticed that I was still too weak for that.

A shadow lying on top of the stone wall next to me was suddenly moving and jumped down, taking a seat next to me. Now I could recognize a face in the dark. "Here, eat this. You lost a lot of blood and the scholar that I had treat you had no blood infusions." Olivia said, putting something in my mouth that tasted like liver before she put a cup with water to my lips.

"I already told you that you should rather let me die." I answered after gulping the water down, glad that it moisturised my dry throat.

"Sorry, I thought that had been some kind of fever dream speaking out of you." she said, her shadow disappearing again.

"H-Hey." I protested.

"Also I still need some information from you, so I couldn't. And if you want to die after that, well, we *are* already under the graveyard." she said, her voice dismissing my protests. *U-Under the graveyard?*

"So... you believe me when I say I am from another world?"

There was no answer.

"If not... why did you help me? Why? You heard what the old fart said about me. You heard what I had done to the woman trying to kill me. But you still had someone treat

me. And, somehow, I am not in a jail cell. *We are not in a cell, right?*” I asked, looking again at the stone walls around me.

“We are in the mausoleum containing every royal grave since the death of Shaha. I am the only one with a key to this place. I could not think of any other place to hide.” She finally said. *Oh, so that is why we are under a graveyard.*

“The reason I am helping you...” she let out a sigh. “The main reason is that you claim to be from another world. I had met someone in the past that was coming here from another world. That very person also had close contact with a being called Ade, who is calling himself a god.”

The shadow appeared again above me, then she got closer, kneeling beside me. Her hand were reaching for my right shoulder, checking the bandages I had on them. *Oh, wait, my upper body is naked!*

“Eek!” I screamed, holding my left hand before my meager chest. “I am a woman too, you know?” Olivia reminded me matter-of-factly.

“But I am a boy!” I shrieked, falling back into my routine out of reflex.

“No, I have checked already.” she replied coldly, looking at my face with a stern look.

I felt my gaze drawn to her eyes, which were mustering me. Her face was cold, but I still felt warmth from them. “You have beautiful eyes.” I blurted out after seeing her vertical pupil again, earning me a flick on the forehead.

“I hate my eyes as much as I hate the rest of my body that transformed.” she muttered, changing the bloody bandage on my shoulder.

“Also I just could not believe you could have killed that many people with the way you had looked after you had poisoned me. And you seemed like a nice person when I talked with you, so much so I even told you about my identity.” she continued, now checking the wound on my thigh.

“You liked me enough after those few sentences we exchanged? Are you desperate or lonely?” I asked her jokingly. Olivia did not answer for a while.

“Well, I *do* get lonely easily. In the blink of an eye everyone I know is already old and dead, leaving me behind. And finding someone I can open up to and talk with even if he knows who I am is also rare nowadays...” She sounded embarrassed somehow.

“So with me you wont be lonely?” I could feel a smile appearing on my face.

“No, before I know it you will also be gone, leaving me behind like everyone else.” she answered without any hesitation, not even looking up.

“Was that the reason you got so angry at me when I said I was jealous of your long life?” I continued asking her, trying to get to understand her. There was a pause, and I could feel her hands stopping to move. “Do you know how it feels to outlive your family?” she asked me, her voice sounding sad. She did not wait for an answer before she continued.

“Do you know how it feels like to survive the one you promised you would spend

your life with him? Or do you know how it feels to survive your own kid? Or the kid she had? Or the child the kid had after that and the one after that?"

I could feel how her hand holding one of the bandages started shaking. "And do you know how it is to outlive everyone that had ever been connected to you? To survive your whole family and see your bloodline fade? The family I had created with my husband is completely gone, I am the last Rothwin alive, but I am not able to get kids again. Do you think this is something to desire?" She continued to change the bandage on my leg. "But it does not stop there. Each day the whole world is getting more different than before. The place I spend my days at are changing or disappearing. The things I had helped to build are taken down, the things I was proud of are now part of a problem and with each coming day I am getting more and more behind in the times, never being able to catch up to it ever again. Everything around me is constantly changing, but I am forced to stay, to *endure*. Not because I want to, but because I have no other choice. And no matter how much I want to die, I am unable to." Her voice was full of pain, almost like she would start crying every moment.

"And that's why I want you to tell me if you know something about Ade. If you met him, or if he is still out there. If he is ignoring me after leaving me behind, breaking his promise."

I gulped audibly. "I..."

I sighed, resigning myself to my fate.

"I can tell you how I got here, if that is what you want. But..." The only thing I could think of with the name Ade were just a name for a medical project. That couldn't be what she meant.

"Please, tell me. Everything helps."

"Okay. Then I will tell you. Tell you how I came here." I said, a bitter smile now on my face.

*She had saved and protected me to hear something about this god named Ade. Yet I never met him nor did I know anything about him. So what would she do once she knew I could not tell her anything?*

*At this point I did not even have to ask anymore. She will just abandon me like everyone else. I might have a crush for her after she had saved me, but she would just drop me like my parents and my ex. I just know it will end this way.*

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I had told her how I steadily disappointed my parents. How I got thrown out. That I lost my job thanks to my stubborn pride and how my ex left me when I just hit the lowest part of my life. How I spend the rest of the time shutting myself in.

And how I decided to jump but changed my mind in the last moment, trying to chicken out, only to see the pale face and finding myself in this world.

“So it really had been Ade...” Olivia said, sitting with crossed legs next to me, leaning her back on the stone wall. “Is that the name of the faceless creature?” She nodded. “He is an obnoxious guy, always going on about this and that, pretending to be happy all the time while giving you his own opinion without even asking. And he really likes to show up before you from time to time, asking you why you did the things the way you did, always questioning your intentions.”

I shook my head. “I have never seen him after he dropped me here. But well, even if I did meet him, what would you want from him?”

“He had promised me he would help me find a way to die after I had called him over an century ago, and well, even if we did kind of have one or two fights...” she sighed. “After the war with Nero had concluded and the plague had started he suddenly vanished. Vanished together with the only other person that actually knew what do about that stupid immortality.” She clenched her fists. “But that stupid woman at least had freed the dragon before she vanished, so at least Oleg is trying to help us...” she muttered, slumping her shoulders.

“Wait, did you just say *dragon*?” I shouted, wanting to jump up again, only to be stopped by the pain in my thigh and my shoulder.

*That is the fantasy stuff I had been hoping for from the start!*

“Yes, a dragon. He is the lead researcher in the biology department and we learned quite a lot of things from him.” she said, shrugging her shoulders like it was nothing special.

“What? A dragon is a researcher? What is next, you tell me he is wearing glasses and wears a hat? And that he is only as big as an adult, walking on two legs and looks more like a lizard than an actual dragon?” I rambled, preparing my soul to be absolutely be disappointed like all the other times before.

Olivia seemed overwhelmed by those questions, but she still answered, putting a bit of space between us. “Eh, he is actually wearing glasses... but he is as big as a house and when he speaks everything around him is shaking from the strength his voice carries. Why do you even ask?”

I shook my head. “You would not understand.” *If I would try to explain those stereotypes in my head she might change her mind about me not being crazy.*

“If you say so...” she muttered, probably glad to let this matter go.

“So, what now? What do you plan to do with me now?” I asked her nervously.

“No plan, really. I did not think farther than saving you, but now that you do not even have any information about Ade... I give up. Also, the situation is not exactly... good for us.”

“Us?” I repeated, tilting my head.

She did not answer and just stood up instead. I heard rustling of paper before she sat down again, handing me a newspaper. I inspected it, holding it very close to my eyes so I could read it.

**-- Special News --**

***Mass murderer abducted our Queen***

*The police revealed pictures of a young woman with her many disguises and a list of almost two thousand victims that she has killed, marking her as biggest mass murderer ever recorded in history, saying she is on the run after abducting Olivia Rothwin, Queen of our nation. "We have currently no reason to panic. Olivia is the immortal queen, a title given to her for a reason. We are sure that she is safe, but we still are giving our best to rescue her." said the mayor, Doroff Hasdo, in an emergency conference this morning. The master of the guild, Theodore Westground, also attended the emergency conference. "We are concerned about everyone in Krahenfels right now, since they are confirmed to be still around in this city."*

*The authorities warn that the abductor, whose real name is Shara, is dangerous and should not be approached on sight or be attacked or provoked in any way. If you see her or the abducted princess or have any clues leading to her capture, please inform the local authorities.*

*Other news: Doroff Hasdo has been dumped after just announcing his Marriage, read more on page 6!*

Next to the article about me abducting Olivia were many pictures of the face of this body with identities and names the former owner had used in the past.

I was surprised to see the same face with so many different variations. Red, black, brown, blond and everything between- she had tried every hair color available to her. And next to those pictures there was also a picture of Olivia, which struck me as odd after she wore a veil at the speech that hid her face.

*But I did chuckle at Gav just dumping that man in the very same night. That just sounds like him.*

"Why are you laughing?" Olivia asked me, sitting down again next to me. *Why?* "Do you know what this means for me?" I asked her, laughing even harder. Not because I really found any of the other news amusing, but rather because I just realized the absurdity of this situation I found myself in.

"That you are a wanted person and you cant go outside anymore." she said, tilting her head. I nodded.

“Exactly. But let me ask you this- both continents are under the control of this nation, making that the whole world you control, right?”

She nodded hesitatingly. “The other continent to the south are officially independent, but they are actually just as much under the thumbs of the guild as all the other regions on this continent. Aside from that, there are no more places where people could live.”

“So, no matter how far I run, I will be hunted, unable to escape being arrested?”

I asked her, wanting to make sure. She nodded, her face showing that she understood now.

“There you have it. I am now officially the enemy of the world. No matter what I do, I can’t run away. I have no friends, no allies and no plan. And the only one that gave enough about a damn about me to rescue me only did so to get some information out of me, but had to learn I could not even help her with that.”

I continued to stare at the newspaper that I was still holding, staring at the pictures of my current body. I turned the page to list of the victims printed down, but the names were too small for me to read them. I threw the newspaper to the side, not wanting to feel even more angst, but it did not help. The mere weight of my situation was heavy enough.

Tears started running out of my eyes, but I still continued to laugh. “You know, I always knew I was pathetic. That I was a moron, an idiot. Hell, I did not even manage to get a life in my past world, and then the moment I lost my home I wanted to jump to end it all. But you know what? I changed my mind in the last moment, not even getting *that* right.” I laughed again, but the tears would not stop, no matter how much I laughed about how incapable I was of doing anything right.

“And then I got thrown into this world. From the very moment I woke up, everyone showed me how useless I was. How I had no place here, sending me away just like in my old world. And while my decision to not go to the orphanage seems to be a good decision now with all those violent people trying to get me at all costs, it was *still* stupid not to do it in the first place at that time.”

I stretched my arm out, grabbing Olivias hand without asking. She did not resist, accepting it without moving a muscle. “And now, everything in this world had come crashing down at me at once. But *this* time its not even *my* fault. I could not have done *anything* against *any* of those things at all. I never *chose* to get this body, unable to see anything farther than the tip of my nose. I never *chose* to enter this body of a *mass murderer*, I never *chose* to murder anyone for money, never *chose* to help terrorists to destroy this nation, never *chose* to mindlessly slaughter the family of that crazy woman. But here I am and everyone is out for me. Do you get it now? The only way this situation can end?” I asked her, the tears coming even stronger now despite my lips still smiling.

She still stayed silent. Her hand did not move.

“There is no way out. This can only end with my death.” I said, trying to accept this absurd reality. “It is me against the world now.” I continued, closing my eyes. “And honestly, I should be dead already. It would have been better for everyone, even you.”

There was a long silence after this, Olivias hand still not moving, but I was glad I had someone near me, that I was not alone. Knowing that alone was the only thing keeping me sane right now.

*Even when I knew it was only temporary. She would also leave me soon.*

“It is not you against the world. It is *us* against the world.”

I turned my face towards Olivia, widening my eyes in surprise. Her face was now close to mine, a slight smile on her face. “You know, they say I am your hostage. So you can order me to do whatever you want me to for a while. You could even order me to help you to escape, for example.”

*...Am I dreaming? No no no, that... I... I can not. This will not do. I will just...*

A part of me was happy about this, but I could not let it get to me. *This was wrong.*

“And then what? Where should I even escape to?” I asked, shaking my head. “No, the better question would be *why* you should do something like this in the first place.”

I said, pulling my hand away.

“Why? Because I want to. Because I feel it is unfair. That treatment would be fair for *Shara*, but not for *Shima*. Because Julius had done the same for the one person he wanted to protect. Because Shaha had been in the same position before, accused and persecuted for a crime she never did.”

“So you just want to do *the right thing* while you cant even be sure that I am telling the truth?” I asked her, getting angry.

She nodded. “Yes. Because I think it is the right thing to do.”

I shook my head, finally forcing my upper body up, ignoring the pain in my shoulder and my leg. Olivia wanted to stop me, but then let me continue after I glared angrily at her.

“If you want to do *the right thing*, than you should kill me. Right here, right now! That would be the very best outcome for both of us.” I said as cold as I could. I had to reject her, here and now.

*If she would help me, she would be also judged for it. And I would only end up relying on the next person now. She would defend me now, only to change her mind later on, just like everyone else had before. So why should I go through that again? Just end it here! Do not make me suffer like this! I already met my limit years ago!*

“I don’t understand you. You say your death would be the best thing to happen, but yet you cry while saying so. If you do not want to die, why do you not want me to help you?” she asked, sounding hurt.

“Why *wouldn’t* I reject your help? Why should I waste your time like this? Not only would you make your own life more difficult by putting yourself on my side, you would have to spend the rest of your life with the consequences!”

“And so what? I want to help you, I want to do what I think is right so Julius will not hate me if I should ever die and meet him! I don’t want to disappoint him! I don’t want to feel ashamed when I think of the very man I loved the most! Is that bad? Do you want to tell me I am wrong to think like that?!” she shot back, sounding desperate.

“What do I know about that? That was another time, another situation! But now even if you help me, you will be judged for the rest of your life, and as the immortal queen, *that will be a very long time!* So stop clinging to your ideals and stop being so stubborn!” I shouted at her.

“I say what I want because I am the thick headed queen that forced my man to love me even when he said I was too young! I am the stubborn queen that forced the great hero of Krahenfels to help me do so using the very slave collars that caused the world war! I am the stupid queen that got herself pregnant while she was too young, causing Shaha to get me some dubious liquid in an heirloom from my parents after almost being executed from them and getting me to drink it after I was about to die while giving birth! And I am the foolish queen whose own egoism caused the whole fiasco of becoming immortal through every stupid thing I have done, caused by my own egoism, my greed and my feelings! And now I say I want to help you, because the people that I loved and hurt in ways I should never had would do the very same thing for you in my stead!” Olivia exploded, not even breathing between those sentences.

“And I don’t want to let the person I have fallen for to be hurt! Or for that person to leave me after realizing what a failure of a human being I am!” I screamed, closing my eyes, the tears not stopping at my sudden confession, but also this torrent of guilt tormenting my heart, stirring around in me, but I still continued shouting it out.

“And I don’t want the person that I admire to see how pathetic I am! Because I don’t want you to fight for me, defend me and support me only to turn around on me and tell me that all the things the other people said had been true!”

The tears just now started to stream out, but I tried to hide them with my left arm. “So please, don’t! Don’t say you will help me when I know you will betray me like everyone else did!” I shouted.

“And why would I do that? Why would you think I would turn on you?” Olivia demanded to know angrily.



“Because everyone did so already! And I just know you will end up doing that, too, telling me how pathetic I am! How much you regret even having spend time with me! And tell me that being with me had been a waste of your time! That I never, ever had been enough!” I continued screaming at her, letting it all out.

A hand forced my left arm away, Olivias face was directly before me, her teeth bared. “If I would say something like this after I helped you / would be the one that is at fault! And to be honest, I already know how pathetic you are! Just the act yesterday, in the car, asking me to just let you die! Come on, as if! How could I let someone just die before me after she had been attacked out of the blue?”

She put her face closer to mine, our foreheads and our noses touching. “And even before that! How you tried to poison me but looked so desperate *after* you had already tried it. Did you not think of that *possibility* that someone might die beforehand? How utterly stupid! Or that you just left me alone, running away after that shot from the old man! If I had been anyone else, that would have been the epitome of being just walking trash!” She shouted, her breath tickling me.

“I know! I know I am trash! I know I am pathetic! I know all of that! And that is why you will also regret helping me, turn your back on me and leave me behind! Just like everyone else!” I shouted back, closing my eyes.

Olivia now got on her knees, my legs between them. Her head moved to my ear, her arms embracing softly around my neck, trying to not press the wound on my right shoulder.

“And you do not think that I am also a lost cause?” she said, her mouth next to my ear. I shook my head. “Why would I? You are immortal, you are a queen, and you protected me in such a heroic way I fell in love with you in that moment. So why would I think that?” I said, my voice sounding still teary.

“I already told you what fool I had been when I was young. Is that not proof enough?” she asked me with a calm voice. I wanted to shake my head, but before that she started speaking again, not leaving me a chance to answer.

“You know, I will tell you a state secret now. Something I am not allowed to speak out in the open. At least, exactly that wording has been the order.” She chuckled silently, her breath tickling my ear.

“You surely heard about the world war one hundred years ago and the plague that came after it. I had been the one to slay the leader of our enemies, Nero. Not like a brave hero on the battlefield, but rather a cowardly assassination born out of helplessness and frustration. And even then he wanted it. He just walked at me, wanting me to kill him. Not because he wanted to end the war. But because he had gotten the plague, knowing this way he would also infect me. And I did not notice. I did not suspect one thing.” The hand around my neck began shaking. I put a hand on her back, surprised to feel a small hill on her shoulder.

“And clueless as I was, we soon returned victorious to Krahenfels. The one man I had been forced to marry at that time was all the time at my side, growing weaker by the day. I thought he might be sick from traveling for so long and ignored the fact that also some soldiers around me started to have the same symptoms.

At home one thing led to another, and suddenly there was a great banquet with all the leaders of the countries on our continent attending. And while I wanted to stay with Gervaise, who was bedridden at that point, I also had to attend as the slayer of the infamous Nero. Everyone wanted to see me, to celebrate my achievement, congratulate and thank me, shake my hands. Only one month later, everyone of them was dead. Gervaise was the first one to die, each of the kings that had attended followed him the coming weeks. The war had claimed the life of a million people. The plague I had spread that day had claimed a billion lives before it could be stopped, claiming even more lives by the sacrifices we had to make, as there was no medicine that could have helped someone infected.” There was a short pause.

“And it had been me who was responsible for it.” Olivia finally said, her voice sounding hoarse, something wet dropping on my neck and my shoulder. “So tell me, am I not pathetic? Am I not just as stupid as you? Am I not even worse than everything what they accuse you of?” she said, her voice breaking down completely.

“And now that you know it, do you still think I would turn on you? Do you still think I will just leave you, saying I would regret it? After everything I have done? Do you really think I would have the right to judge *you*?”

“I-” I started, but I did not know what to say.

She pulled her head away, now looking at me, still sitting on her knees, my legs between them. I could see the lines of tears from her eyes, but she had stopped crying. “So, do you think I would turn on you? Tell me.”

I knew she wanted me to say no. I knew that the only answer I could give her after what she just told me had to be no. But the thing with experiences is, you can't just shake them of. My trust had been betrayed not once, not twice, but many times before. So I looked down, saying nothing, avoiding her eyes.

“Then tell me. Is it okay for you to die? Is the *perfect solution* something you want?” She said after a pause, her voice soft.

I hung my head, unable to say anything.

*Of course I did not want to die! Even in my old world I did not really want to! I mean, how could I? I was just cornered, not knowing what to do, not seeing any other way out of the situation, just like now!*

“So you want to survive?” she asked me, taking my hands in hers.

“Of course! Of course I do! Its unfair that everyone wants to kill me for something I did not do! I hate the thought of suffering for something like that! I hate the fact that I was forced into this world! I hate the fact I have to live in the body of a monster! I

hate that I have to occupy another body in the first place!" I screamed, a damn inside me breaking down.

"I had prayed for a fantasy world, and I got this crap! No magic anymore, no special OP skill, no adventure guilds, no monsters, no cute girl coming as my sidekick! The whole point of a fantasy world I was dreaming of was just gone! And to top it off, I could not even survive here without selling my body even if it wasn't for the fact that everyone wanted to kill me for being an assassin! And then the girl I fell in love with turns out to already having married at least two other guys, both of them being royal! I mean, how should I even compare to that, having the girl of a body now and being the enemy of everyone in the world? How is any of that fair? I want a redo! I want to punch that stupid god that got me here in the face for just dropping me into this pile of problems that are not my own!"

I exploded, shouting everything that annoyed me, venting it with my teary voice.

"So... will you let me help you survive?" Olivia asked me. I had not noticed when I had looked up again while talking, but now I could see the sincere smile on her face she was giving me.

She was still holding my hands while doing so, her hands seemed cold through her gloves, but it still felt like they were giving me warmth.

"You will not betray me?" I asked her, my voice shaking.

"No."

"You will not turn your back on me, saying you should never have bothered?"

"No."

"You promise you will never leave me?"

"Yes."

I took a deep breath.

"Olivia. I fell in love with you." I said.

"I know."

"Will you please help me survive?"

She hugged me. She felt warm and smelled nice. "Yes, I will." she said. "Even if I do not know if I can return your love, I will stay with you until death do us part." she told me with a firm voice. I returned her hug, putting my arms around her, too.

*Of course she would not give me a straight answer to my confession.*

*But her staying with me... is enough for now.*

I buried my head on her chest. She felt warm, Her hug felt like I was in heaven, like this was the one place in this world where I was safe, where nothing bad could ever happen. My hands started to shake, soon my whole body joined.

"I am cold..." I whispered.

"Wha-? What should I do about this? Do you want another blanket?" Olivia asked, trying to stand up, but I hold her back, hold her in my arms.

“No- stay!” I screamed instinctively, putting all my might in my arms, hugging her even stronger. Tears started running out of my eyes again.

“The past few years I had been so lonely.” I confessed, starting to cry with all my might on her chest. She relaxed and put her arms again around my back, petting my head softly, waiting until I finally relaxed.

“I had been so lonely...” I muttered, falling asleep in her arms.

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I woke up after I heard loud banging. Opening my eyes I found myself leaning against the wall, a blanket around my shoulder. I had fallen asleep hugging Olivia, crying like a baby. Thinking back on it now I felt ashamed and wanted to curl up in a corner, but on the positive side, I felt better now, having finally been able to vent my feelings after a very long time.

The banging stopped and then two voices approached, talking with each other. I recognized the voice of Olivia among them, but as far as my eyes and the light in the room goes, I had no way to see them at all.

Finally they got to me and stopped before me.

“He really is the thief. Or, well, she. Better than my workshop, but still not a good place.” a manly voice that I recognized.

The man came closer, making no footsteps doing so. “I had never thought that such a famous assassin would just steal one of my glasses. And be nice enough to even take the cheaper ones. That isn’t something you experience every day, you know?”

“Oh, so you two already know each other?” Olivia asked.

“Sure. I already thought she looked pretty familiar when I treated her, but now with that picture of all your identities hanging around everywhere it’s pretty obvious.”

I prostrated myself before him, trying to not move my right arm. “I am sorry! I did not want to steal from you, but I had no other choice since I cant see anything without glasses, just like now!” I shouted. “I always wanted to come back one day and pay you, but even now the rest of money I have is in the hands of terrorists!” I continued.

Something long and cold patted my head. “Sure, sure, that is what they all say.” I looked up, seeing that the man was patting my head with the end of a snake tail

“And, since that nice girl here was pleading for me to save you with just barely enough effort to make it somewhat convincing that she cared about your life-”

“Don’t lie. I just forced her on you, not even helping at first. Also, eh, sorry about your car.” Olivia added from somewhere behind.

“That is how you treated me?!” I asked her, exasperated. She did not answer, but I could imagine that she probably just shrugged with her shoulders.

“Anyway. Olivia just compensated me. And the old man that had been there when you were stealing from me had covered the old ones.” the Naga continued.

He put something before me. I stretched my hand out, lifted it carefully and inspected it. “Glasses...” I said, not believing it, recognizing them as the ones I had tried on before.

I put them on, finally being able to see more than just a blurry mess again. I mustered the man before me. He was the Naga from the stall, his face expressionless, the end of his tail behind him going left and right.

“The Nagas usually express their feeling with the end of their tails, just a few are exceptions from this.” Olivia explained after noticing my look.

“Thank you, mister!” I said to him, then turned to her. “What is he expressing with it?” She smiled. “He is not angry at you, his tail actually says he is quite hap-”

“Ahem!” the man interrupted her. “I also need to remind you, majesty, that gold coins are not our currency anymore. So I practically gave you that glasses costing enough to feed a family for a month for a few gold clumps just barely the same worth.” he scolded her, his tail now going in a circle.

“Why do you sell those things anyway? I thought you were a scholar. Not a doctor or a merchant.” Olivia countered.

“Well, I *am* a scholar! And I normally study the art of making lenses and optics, but since I do not need every lens I make for my experiments, I earn my pocket money selling them. Or patching up criminals on the run, as of late.” he said, shooting me a glance. “Anyway, I cant stay for too long. The people in this city are like hawks, looking for everything that is suspicious in the slightest. They really love you, majesty, even if you only make a speech every twenty years or so.” he said, turning around and slithered out of the mausoleum, the end of his tail wagging left to right.

“We can trust him, since his whole line of work got only possible after I recommended him to the dragon I told you about.” Olivia said, looking after him, before she finally came to me, holding a small basket with some preserved food.

“Here, you can have that.” she said, putting it before me. “You wont have any?” I asked her, tilting my head.

“No, why? I am immortal. I do not need food, water or even air or sleep to go on.”

“That is kind of OP, you know?” I added, taking a bread out of the basket and biting into it. “OP?” She asked, tilting her head again.

“It means overpowered. A cheat skill, if you want.” I said, breaking the bread in two and holding the other half out to her. “I do not think that my immortality is a *cheat skill* or *overpowered*, it’s more like a curse.” She took also a bite from her bread.

“Once they put me on a metal stake while chaining my arms behind me with iron, lighting a fire below me. They kept it going for two days while I could not escape,

forced to endure being burned alive until they finally gave up on killing me.” She told me, biting into the half of the bread I had given her.

“...You can have also my portion.” I shoved my half eaten bread in her hand. Suddenly I lost my appetite after hearing that story and noticing how the bread still had some darker burn marks on the bottom.

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Olivia and I sat down around the newspaper from the day before. Her legs were crossed. Since I could not really move my left leg I stretched it awkwardly out, but there was a serious look on our faces.

We were starting our meeting to plan the strategy how to go forward from this point on.

*And you know how it always goes in stories. We will have one meeting and suddenly everything that seemed impossible beforehand suddenly can be turned around, enabling the protagonists to win against all odds. So of course we are gonna hold one, duh!*

We both sat quietly across each other, looking down at the newspaper, the silence unbroken for minutes already.

“I give up. You are doomed.” Olivia said.

“Yep. Totally doomed.” I agreed with her, nodding along like this did not involve me.

“To hell with that! There must be something that *can* be done!” I shouted, hitting the newspaper with my flat hand.

“Ugh, sure. But if there is, I do not even know where to start. Also, I do kind of wonder, but which color are your eyes? All the pictures of you have different ones.” Olivia looked at me quizzically after her gaze fell on the newspaper.

“It is my curre- I totally forgot I am still wearing colored contacts!” I screamed, rushing to wash my hands with the water out of a bottle and taking them out.

*I did hear that wearing them too long can cause your eyes to hurt. Good that I noticed before that happened.*

“Now you can see my natural color” I said, sitting down just like before. She came closer to me, staring at my eyes and letting out a sound of awe.

“Your eyes sure are beautiful. I could stare at them for days. Almost like a ruby, going from red to reddish pink to a bit of blue. Just like an expensive gem!”

I blushed, thinking about how I also complimented her eyes just yesterday.

“T-Thank you.” I muttered, turning my head away, even though this was not my body.

“So anyway, let us just start by collecting everything we know about the forces out there hunting me and continue from there.” I said, trying to change the topic.

“In that case, I will start first with the thing that wonders me the most. And that is the headline of me being abducted by you.” Olivia went back down, crossing her arms. “That timing does make no sense whatsoever. It would not be the first time I would be out the whole night. And Theodore had seen me leaving with you and he knows I *cannot* and *will not* disobey him. Plus there is the fact that there is even a picture of *me* on there after all the lengths he and his father had gone to slowly let the public forget it, with me wearing the veil and everything every time I appear officially.”

“Wait, that was not your own idea so you can just run around in public without anyone recognizing you?” I asked her, tilting my head.

“Definitely not. It was all a part of their planning since his grandfather got me out of jail after I brought the plague here.” She said, sounding serious.

“I am very bad at history, so can you please keep that story short and without complicated words?” My request came out in a monotone voice, but I could not help it. “If that is what you want...” She sighed before she started, not really looking like she was annoyed about telling me.

“The short gist of it is that the remaining noble faction that existed at that point noticed that I was the one who had brought it there, trying to execute me by burning me on the stake. Since that did not go as planned they threw me in a jail where for some reason Theodore’s father appeared, even after everyone of them should have been executed for treason at that point. To bring peace to the kingdom of Harkur and all the other countries that just lost their leaders he pulled every thread he could, even using me. And of course he just *had* to have got a hold of a few crates full of these damned slave collars, using them on every important member of the guild and everyone that joined us in their desperation, trying to prevent a second world war from happening just months after the first. Seeing no other way in reaching one of my goals with unifying the world, I joined him by putting on slave collars for him, becoming a slave for the Westground’s just a few years after I escaped Nero who had wanted the very same outcome.” She went down the whole line of history in one breath.

“That should be the gist of it.” she concluded.

“That slave collars seem to be quite a nuisance.” I said with a grin, nodding my head.

*No fantasy world without slavery, I guess. That was a common trope by now.*

“You don’t say! How twisted do you have to be in your head to even design such a thing that makes you obey what someone says no matter what! Curse that damn witch!” she shouted while putting her arms on her hips, venting her anger. “And speaking of those nuisances, could you please take them off for me? If the reported case of me being your hostage is his way of telling me that I should stay with you, I wont need them anymore.” she said, beginning to stand up and undress.

I nodded, not realizing what she just started doing. "Sure."

*Wait. She was undressing! Right before me!*

"Stop! You don't have to undress for that, right?" I shouted, but it was too late. In that moment the black dress she was wearing hit the floor, leaving her in her underwear.

At the sight of her body I paused, but she was not finished. She also started to remove her shoes and her socks together with her gloves, exposing what I had thought of as an illness.

"Surely you won't be in love with me after seeing this." She joked, putting her arms before her chest and slowly rubbing the non human skin on her right hand.

That hand was something that resembled more a paw of a lizard with five fingers and long claws where fingernails were supposed to be. There was no human skin on her right hand, instead it was covered with brown and pointy scales.

Her left foot also did not resemble anything humane, but rather looked dino-like in those hollywood movies, being also covered in those brown scales with long claws pointing to the ground. Her torso was overcast at random spots with the same brown scales, leaving only her face that remained humane. If it wasn't for her eyes, that is.

I stared at Olivia with my mouth agape. She seemed uncomfortable, looking on the ground and smiling bitterly, waiting for my reaction to her appearance.

The only thing coming to mind after looking at her was-

"How cool! You look like you are a mix between dragon and human! And that right hand alone! Are those claws sharp? Or is there some edgy dark force sealed in there, just trying to break out? Or can you shoot something out of it? Or is it your throat or something, like, can you spit fire?" I barraged her with questions, and her gloomy mood instantly vanished, turning into visible confusion.

"Why do you have the *exact* same response that Shaha did?!" She asked, covering her underwear with her hands and trying to make herself small, trying to escape my gaze. "Yes, they are sharp, no I can not shoot something out and no, I can not breath fire or anything like that! I just turned into something resembling a dragon, but in the ugliest way possible!" she shouted, tears in her eyes.

She turned her back to me that also was covered in parts with the scales and had two small stumps extending from her shoulders.

"Please just remove the collars! I can't touch them myself! The original stops the muscles of the wearer if their hand approaches them and I have been ordered to never touch the others!" she shouted, not even looking at me.

I nodded even though she could not see it, and came closer. "They are on each of my upper arms and each ankle." she informed me, stretching out her arms to the side, her back still pointing at me.

"So that is why you are always wearing a dress covering your whole body." I muttered, curiously running a finger over a scaly part of her skin.



“Yes, and those not fully developed stumps that should have been wings are the reason I always wear capes. They stick out in a weird way, so I have to hide them.” she whispered, having calmed down a bit. Just as I had touched the scales, I extended my hand, running my finger now down on one of those stumps, feeling a bone beneath it.

“That tickles! Stop!” she shouted at me, while turning her head a bit. I could see her flushed cheeks. *How cute! I want to tease her more!*

But I knew better and looked at the collar around her right upper arm. It was black with a yellow line in the middle, a metal lock holding it in place. Carefully I put my hands on it, touching the mechanism locking it. With a clang it sprang open, falling on the ground. After repeating that three more times Olivia was finally free, dressing herself again.

“Until this day the highest members of the guild in every country put them on as soon as they are appointed to their posts, even praising them as heirloom. But only a few know what they *really* are nowadays.” she said, holding up one of the collars with disgust in her eyes.

“I *still* love you, by the way.” I blurted out, remembering what she muttered when she showed me her body. “Now is *not* the time for this!” she hissed at me, not pleased for some reason. And in that moment I just noticed what I was wearing myself. Nothing over my bare chest but bandages, only a blanket around my back and my white underwear.

*The stall owner had seen me like this? I am basically naked! And I did not even notice! Can I go cry in a corner?*

“Don’t worry, the tribes are really traditional where Shozzo grew up, and their tradition clothes are... well, going commando. Shaha came from such a tribe, too, but at least she tried to hide it *most* of the times.” She told me, noticing my panic after looking at my body.

“Anyway!” She shouted, forcing us back to the topic we had started with, that being the strategy meeting. “Now that I am free, we do not have to care about Theodore for now!” She continued, once again clapping her hands together. I nodded, continuing the conversation where we had stopped it before.

“That leaves that lunatic woman, who will just hunt me like a feral dog no matter what, so we can leave her out. Next in line is the old fart, who will also want to kill me myself, but he has contacts and information about me I do not know, making him an unknown threat.” I added, going through each force in the blink of an eye.

*I think it would be shorter to say that we know almost nothing about them, making them even more dangerous than I would like to.*

“The last fraction is the terrorist organization led by Gav and Alis. They are the only ones I know, and what I *do* know is absolutely not to my liking. Almost every

prostitute in the red light district is working for them, they have agents all over the continent and contacts in every important facility. Even the staff in the palace had helped me to poison you. And, making this even more confusing, because this just isn't bad enough already- I do not know if they are hostile to me or not, since you did the speaking for me. Last I remember was you telling me that you shot Alis." I concluded everything I knew.

"I am pretty sure they are hostile to me after I shot that woman with the big breasts. But I had no other choice." Her voice seemed a bit sad, but there was no regret on her face.

"I hope she survived..." I muttered. They might be terrorists and they did want to dispose of me, yes. But I still could not bring it over my heart to really hate them. They had helped me when I had nowhere else to go. And it had been Alis that had convinced Gav to not throw me out and always cared about my wounds.

"I still have no clue what we could do. Maybe run away, since we cant stay here forever, but that would not help." Olivia said, her shoulders slumping down.

"Yep. I am completely screwed." I concluding our meeting.

*And that was how our perfect battle strategy meeting ended, turning the tables and letting us win against all odds. Or at least how I wished it would have ended, but honestly, we just had not enough information, no way to change the fact that I was a criminal and no way to take back all the information that old fart had made public.*

*Me surviving this whole thing seems more like a dream.*

## **8: Like A Snake Through The Streets**

The next days seemed to drag on painfully slow. I finally could see my surroundings thanks to the gift from Shozzo, something I should be happy for...

.t was just that... it was a depressing sight.

Stone coffins were the only thing in this dark and moist room beside the two of us. Yesterday the single oil lamp that had been spending a dim light had run out and the food was almost gone. And as if that was not bad enough already, cold air came flowed inside, leaving me shivering under the two blankets I had wrapped around me. I also still had no clothes, did not shower for days and the bandages were still getting bloody.

Olivia said I would need it to replace the blood I had lost, feeding me more dried liver and nuts, even though the small amount of food we still had left was almost gone.

She assured me that the stall owner surely would drop by soon again. Only that she did not seem like she believed it herself, getting more restless with each passing day.

Today we had been down here a week already when someone knocked on the door. Olivia sprang to her feet, carefully sneaking the stairs up and listened carefully. After a short moment she opened the metal door, letting the stall owner enter. "Shozzo, where have you been that long?" Olivia asked him after she closed the door behind him, anger on her face.

He did not say anything but came closer to me, throwing one of the three bags from his hand to me. It landed on the ground with a thump, sliding towards me.

"Someone had broken in my flat, leaving this with your ID behind." he grumbled, his voice emotionless, the end of his tail slapping on the ground.

It looked like the bag Shara, the former owner of my body, had left with Gav and Alis, but it had some burn marks on it.

I hesitated a moment before I reached out and opened it.

It was my bag, still containing the crossbow, the ID calling me Shima, the etui with the broken glasses and the two knives with the black tape.

"After I found it I waited for three days, looking out for someone following me. I only came here after confirming that nothing seemed conspicuous." he continued, putting down a basket on the ground. "Here are some clothes for you and something to disguise yourself with. Also, here." he said, putting down a bucket he had carried. "The water is a bit cold now, but you will need to wipe yourself down before you go outside." he continued.

"Wait, go out?" I asked him, tilting my head.

"We might already have been discovered if they know he has connections to us." Olivia said. "We have to leave as soon as possible."

"Take only with you what you need, let the rest stay here. Also, give me the key to the mausoleum, Olivia. I will drive home and clean up behind you later. If you make it out unseen, we can pretend that you are still here, giving you more time." he continued, already on his way out. *Wait, he can drive a car with that lower body?*

"Sure I can." *Crap, I blurted my thoughts out loud again.*

"I just have to use the passenger seat for the most of my tail and can only use one pedal with the tip of my tail. I think that had been the reason they installed the brake in the steering wheel when they designed the cars."

"Wait, that stupid system makes sense!?" both Olivia and I cried out loud, gasping at him. *I mean, now that I think about it, it makes sense. Demi humans surely also want to travel by car and use technology. No wonder they made such a weird system, trying to find a solution everyone could use.*

The stall owner, fed up with our reaction, wordlessly left the mausoleum, only leaving behind the sound of a rusty door being slammed shut.

“Olivia?”

“Yes?” She turned around, looking at me.

“I get why you are helping me by now, but why is he doing so? Even if he owes you, he still should know by now what my past me has done.”

She tilted her head, putting a finger to her chin. After a few seconds she started shaking her head. “I think he trusts my judgement more than some accusations from a newspaper. And if I decided to bring you to him, asking him to save you and even hide you in the most sacred space for my family, he might guess there is more to this situation.”

I nodded, starting to take the towel out of the basket and starting to wipe myself with the water in the bucket. The water still seemed warm, indicating that he had taken the extra mile for us. “You also want to clean yourself?” I asked Olivia while wiping my body, but she shook her head. “How often do I need to tell you I lost most of the things you consider normal, like thirst, hunger or even sweating?”

She sounded annoyed, but I only grinned at her. “You will smell like this room after we spend so much time in here. And boy, the smell is moldy in here!”

She shot me an angry glare before also grabbed a towel and joined me.

When we were done Olivia took out the disguises the stall owner had prepared for us. I was surprised at what he considered as *disguise*.

“I forgot that the festival is today...” Olivia muttered, looking at the cloth in her hand, holding back her laughter.

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After some consideration I started to try to tape the two knives on my arm. Unlike last time I taped them to my wrists, so I could grab them faster.

*And to look cool, of course.*

“Are you sure you should put them on your wrist? That does not look like it will hold...” Olivia commented while watching me.

“I don’t see the problem. Holds perfectly!” I gave her a thumbs up and put the other hand on my hips, prompting one of the knives to fall out of my sleeves.

“If you say so.”

I promptly crouched down and tried to pick up the knife, but then the second one also fell out, landing next to the other one. “Please pretend that this never happened...” I murmured, my cheeks burning.

“It did happen. Also, please lend me one of the knives, I need to do something important before we go.”

With a defeated look I gave her the knife, not looking into her eyes.. She promptly picked up the slave collars I had removed from her and cut through one of them.

“You are going to destroy them?” I asked her, while she was already cutting up the second one.

“Yes. That those things still exist is a crime in itself.” She answered, a slight anger in her voice. “Good thing that at least we shot down the facility producing them, together with every knowledge of how to construct them in the first place. And since there are no mages in this day and age, they will never be able to exist ever again.”

She cut up the third one.

“So they really function with magic...” I starred at them.

“But could we not use one of those on that maniac trying to get revenge on me?” I asked her, watching how she just picked up the fourth one.

“No!” She shouted, her face in a fury. “No matter what, I will not allow those to be used ever again like that!”

She ripped through the last collar with the knife and threw it on the ground, stomping on it and grinding it with her left foot.

“I will never allow them to be used like this ever again! I will never forget how Nero send the woman, the children and the ill out through the desert, one by one, ordering them to go straight to the army and attack them with whatever they had in their hands. How they, pleading to die after marching through the desert for days without a break, still had to throw themselves barehanded at our soldiers, trying to kill them, having no choice but to obey.”

Tears ran down her face, yet she continued letting it out.

“All the dead bodies on the way that did not make it. The villages where the people were forced to kill their families for the slavers, who were treating it like a show. The dead girls in their rooms, discarded naked like trash when they broke. The dead children among them. The mass graves we had to dig after the war, burying all the people who the soldiers had to kill, having no other choice after being attacked by them, even if they were forced to.”

She looked at me, her face showing a hatred and despair. “I do not see any reason to ever use something like this ever again! And I will not let someone use them as a weapon ever again!” She stomped her foot one final time on the collar.

“I... sorry, I did not know that.” I awkwardly apologized after a long pause, looking away and scratching my head.

She put her hands before her face, rubbing her eyes and trying to calm her breath.

“No, I... I should not have exploded like that. You couldn’t have known and I was just wearing them myself a few days ago...” She sighed and slumped her shoulders, reaching me the knife I had lent her.

“I don’t think you were wrong though. That does... seem like quite the experience

you had back there.” I put both knives in my pocket, not bothering anymore with the tapes. I did not know how Shara had done it and at this point I did not care either. Hopefully I wouldn’t even need them. The thought of hurting someone still felt wrong, even in a fantasy world.

“It is a shame we have to leave the crossbow here, but it’s just simply too big.” I said, glancing at the bag with longing eyes one more time before I put the white pelt mantle over my shoulder and pulled its fluffy hood over my face, just like Olivia did.

“I am ready, Olivia.”

With our hair covered and the hood sitting low over our face no one should realize who we were, as long as we did not stand out. At least I hoped it would play out this way, since wearing those white pelts with the hoods over our faces practically screamed “look at us”, even if she had assured me that they were the perfect disguise for today.

“Then let us go.” Olivia said, leading the way out of the mausoleum.

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“We were behind the palace all that time?” I wondered out loud after we left the mausoleum. The graveyard with Olivias royal family members was just behind the big palace and even had a small gate leading to the park with the pond, only that everything was covered in white snow that still continued to fall.

“Do not leave new trails in the snow. Follow the one Shozzo had already made coming to us.” Olivia warned me.

I did as she asked, walking behind her. “Are snakes not creatures that hibernate over the winter?” I thought out loud, trying to understand how the biology worked here. “Yes, the Nagas normally do. That was until Shaha came to us, who for some reason did not hibernate. One of the reasons she found her way to Krahenfels in the first place.”

We came to a gate leading into a side street. No people were around us, no one waiting to ambush us. Olivia lead the way to the main street accompanied by a torrent of voices coming from the direction.

“Only a few years after her death we found out why she did not hibernate. At first we thought it was because she was a human in the inside, or just some mutation. But scholar Godwin later found out that if they do not eat like their instincts tell them too in the first late autumn in their life, they simply never develop the need to hibernate. Or rather their body forgets to, leaving them unable to ever hibernate again.”

We came to the main street in front of the palace. A big crowd of people were there, everyone wearing pelts or horns on their body, almost as if they were trophies from their hunt.

“Since publishing that discovery the society of the Nagas that were living in our city changed, most of them choosing to not hibernate while the ones living outside in tribes still do.” Olivia continued.

“You seem to talk about the past a lot today.” I said, smiling, while we joined the crowd, holding hands with her so we would not get separated.

“Am I annoying you? Sorry...” she muttered, looking dejected. I shook my head. “I could listen to you all day, so please, continue. Though I do have to admit that history never had been my strong suit.” I gave her a warm smile, scratching my chin. “Really? I will not hold back, you know?” A smile appeared on her face, her cheeks slightly blushing. I nodded, clenching her hand.

She gave me the happiest smile I had ever seen from her. When she noticed I was watching her she coughed into her hand and pointed at the pelts and then the horns worn by those around us while we were walking with the crowd down the big street to the keep.

“Those pelts we wear are a symbol for the hunting trophies Shahas tribe gathered over the year. When they killed prey, they kept some part of it, and when they died, they were stored in a big room their leader lived in, something like a memento of their existence. Actually Shaha had some trophies from monsters she had slain on her own, and following her wish we put them with her in her coffin.”

“Shaha did seem to have a big impact on you, huh?” I stated half serious. “Yes. But not only on me, but the whole kingdom of Harkur. When we were young and her brother was still alive, we would do that little dance they do at the front together with some poor guards that had to follow us, starting this whole festival we are celebrating today.”

“Huh? Dance? I don’t see one.” I tried to get a look at the front, but I was simply too small in this body compared to the adults around me. *How old is this body, anyway?*

“Then let us go!” Olivia said with a big grin on her face, suddenly pulling me and running all the way to the front of the crowd.

“Sto-Stop please!” I said, trying to catch my breath after we finally reached the tip of the train walking down the street. “My leg... it hurts.” I huffed, getting a bit dizzy. My body had not recovered yet and I could feel something warm on my left thigh.

“Sorry, I got a bit eager there...” Olivia muttered awkwardly.. “You can use my shoulder if you want to, just give me the word.”

I shook my head. It did hurt, but it was okay for now. “Attention to the people ahead now, please.” She continued her tour, for some reason now talking like she was an tour guide from my old world.

“Here you can see that the Nagas with their spears are doing some dance. Those spears coming down the front with their tips down represent the fangs of the Nagas, the spears pointed horizontally to the front represent the lower jaw, making this the head of the snake that is slithering down the street.”

*It looked funny somehow. But I guess that is the spirit of festivals and traditions.*

“A bit further up the street musicians with drums will join, starting to play a beat. Over the years also people started joining with big pulled cars behind the crowd following the lead, throwing down sweets and selling all kind of festival decorations and wine. Well, no wine anymore after the ban.”

“So you and Shaha went down the streets down like this with spears and started a weird tradition that got this big?” I wondered out loud, looking to the side of the big street. Many people were watching, holding their kids back who were screaming with joy and playing with sticks while wearing costumes made of pelts and horns. *This is like the carnival in my old world. Only that people here dress up as monsters with pelts instead of pirates and super heroes. Quite funny that it also falls into the same time of the year.*

“Originally this is a tradition that was held much later in the year. Young Nagas are completely snakelike at their birth, only shedding their skin and gaining their human part in the middle of summer. To celebrate this the whole tribe hold a parade like this.” Olivia rolled her eyes. “I bet Shaha would be fuming if she knew we would hold it at the start of spring now. The timing makes no sense now, but back then we had no choice but to change it. After the plague was finally gone in winter, we needed something to cheer people up, so we started the celebration a bit earlier. And since that year it never changed back.”

*Did she read my mind?*

“Oh, you see that bakery in that corner shop over there? Back when Shaha was just declared a royal pet and people still saw her as monster she did not really care about what people thought of her after her brother was born.”

*Declared a royal pet? Oh boy, history was wild here.*

“Even though most people avoided her like the plague, thinking she might go feral like a monster, she was never bothered by it. And one day she took her brother and me into that bakery, buying bread from the surprised owner and just biting into it, not even letting someone test it for poison first. I am still not sure if she did not care or just did not even think of that, but I tend to the latter.” She laughed at the memory, seeming a bit melancholy. “The world where you come from must have been a peaceful one. At least that is what I think, but Shaha never really told me anything about her world or even her past, unlike you.”

*So that Shaha girl also had come from another world. But it does not sound like her life has been any easier.*



I shook my head. "My world is not really peaceful. There are still wars going on all over the world. The weapons they use in them never get any more humane. Though, even if your country might be involved in a war, most of them were at another end of the world. It is like you would never even notice until you read the news, enjoying the peace in your homeland, unaware of the soldiers dying to protect it."

I let out a sigh. "Honestly, I never really thought about it before, but still in the peaceful times in our world people still fall mysteriously out of windows after opposing the wrong faction, others are poisoned, no matter which country, for threatening the wrong persons. And our whole media, no matter if books, hobbies, games or shows, are filled with war themes playing in the past, the present and the future. And some of them are even promoted for kids, though that trend was disappearing slowly." *It is not like I did really care about it that much. Hell, I did play shooters and military simulations all the time, even though RPGs always had been my favorite. But they also were mostly about war and conflicts, even if it was just in a fantasy world. And thinking of it, did I not also wish to come here because of these very things? Ugh...*

"Please let us change the topic, that one got depressing really fast. I am kind of falling into a spiral where I am questioning the very essence of everything I ever did and enjoyed." I said to Olivia with a dry laugh.

"Sure. And I see the very next thing for your royal history tour." She said, her voice barely reaching my ears with the drummers joining the crowd this moment.

She stopped and waited for a moment with me until the crowd had mostly passed. When I looked around I noticed we had already reached the keep containing the orphanage, standing near the statue I had seen before. It showed a topless Naga wrapping her long tail around a young woman I recognized and an Man with a crown, his face and the crown being destroyed.

"You probably recognized that the girl holding the hand of the man and the Naga is me. Surely you can guess who the other ones are, right?"

"That Naga then is Shaha, and the man... probably your husband, right?" I said, thinking back on the tidbits I did remember from the tour in the castle.

"Correct. They really perfectly captured Shaha, even though she protested *a lot* about being topless here, yet she sometimes tended to be a bit... open with her body. And Julius..." She made a pause, her fists clenched a little.

"The last two fools, Sha and Shaa, named after Shahas mother and her brother, destroyed his face and crown after killing their own father." Olivia stretched her hand out towards the statue of the man for a moment before clenching it. "Two people of the Westground family had escaped the execution, and while the one was the father of Theodore, the current head of the guild, the other one was his brother. And that brother convinced those two fools that they should start a coup and join the slaver

fraction, almost starting the slave war again right after we had just won it. They thankfully only hold the position at the top for a month. And they were the ones responsibly for trying to burn me alive. I had to give the order to execute them to Theodore's father in order to stabilize the country. Even if they had been the last of my blood and the last family I had..." Her voice grew weaker while telling me about this, her hands shaking a bit. I could not see her face right now, but it felt like she was crying.

Carefully I put my hand on her back, petting her a bit between her shoulders, trying to not touch the stumps.

"I am sorry... that festival just makes me very melancholic." She looked up again, wiping a tear from her eye while smiling at me. "And it feels nice to tell someone. It's like I do not have to carry the burden all alone anymore."

Feeling my cheeks burning again I tried changing the topic, pointing at the crowd that was almost gone. "We should catch up. Also you still did not tell me where we are going."

"Sure." She said, locking her arms with mine, leaning her head against my upper arm, ignoring how red I must look by now.

"After we pass the statue of Shahas brother further down the road we will enter the tunnels, taking a train through the swamp. I still have some connections with the tribe that lives there, since they occupy the very cave that had once been the home of Shahas tribe. Normally they do not allow humans there, wanting to strictly abide their traditions, but I fear we have no other choice."

I nodded. Though the mention of the swamp... *is that truck still buried there after I left it? And what about the guy that crazy woman had killed out there?*

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Still linked arm in arm we continued our way. Soon we caught up to the crowd, but it had stopped for some reason, men in black suits were going about, appearing around the crowd and even behind us. "Careful, those are government agents. They have even more authority than the usual police officers. Try to not stand out." She warned me, distancing herself from me and even letting go of my hand. I was sad about her not being that close anymore, but I tried to not let it show on my face.

"Is it normal that they are here?" I asked her, whispering for some reason. "No, it is not. Also, why are you whispering?" she asked me, also whispering for some reason. "No reason, really. Just thought it might be appropriate now." I whispered back, earning me a kick to my shin that I commented with a laugh.

"Greetings, humans and humanoids of all kind, I welcome all of you on this special day!" A voice shouted from farther behind the back. A big wagon pulled by a car was

coming from behind the outer wall of the keep, the point where we would have to pass according to Olivia.

“Last week I had announced that we had planned a big surprise. And I want to show it to you all personally today!” said the man standing on the moving stage. I recognized him as Theodore, the man that had sat on the throne just after we left the ball.

Some people behind us rushed past us, big black boxes in their hands with something round at the front. *Are those cameras?*

There was a second car drawing something through the city gates, a big plane placed above it, covering what was under it.

“Today I will present you something you have never seen before! Something truly unique! Something that will change the world and how we perceive it, opening the doors to a future yet untold or even thought of!” Theodore screamed, excitement on his face. Flashes came from the people holding the cameras, but Theodore only stretched out his arms, bathing in the glory of his speech and the anticipation build in the crowd that grew bigger by the second.

“Many years ago we gathered the top scientists of this world, advancing our research with technologies just waiting to storm the market. So many of them, indeed, that even we, the most advanced city in the world, cannot follow the speed!” He let out a laugh. “Sorry, but that is the truth, no matter how hard it might sound. But let me assure you, in just a few years we will see the world with other eyes, seeing the distances between us shrink, letting us reach even further heights!”

*What, did you discover the Internet in a day and age there are not even computers? Congratulations, old man.*

“And without further ado, let me reveal our future.” Theodore said, pointing at the other wagon. Just like he ordered, the cover was lifted, revealing a-

“Is that a freaking space rocket?!” I shouted, clasping a hand over my mouth. “This is the technological milestone. Not the original, at least, that one is much bigger. But this is a scaled model of the original. A rocket, capable of reaching the space over our heads where there is no air. And in half a year we will start the first rocket, enabling us to learn more about the very planet we stand upon!” He pointed to the sky where the moon still could be seen. “The goal is to reach the moon in another five years, proving that the united nations are capable of everything we set our mind to!”

The cameras flashed, the crowd started cheering, kids started running to the model of the space rocket that looked like a smaller version of the Saturn V.

“You knew what that was only from taking a look at it?” Olivia asked me, her eyes open in disbelief. I nodded, but then shook my head.

*Can this world even be classified as a fantasy world if they already started going for the moon? This setting would be crazy in any kind of story!*

“That... I knew something similar from my old world. Apparently the design we had for those rockets at the time of our own first moon landing were the pinnacle of design, judging by the design you came up strongly resembling ours.”

*Too late for magic, swords and monsters, too early to explore the space. It was like I was living in my old world again, only with less luxury from technology.*

I sighed at those thoughts, feeling my mood drop. *What even was the reason in me being in this world? Surely I did not get thrown into this world without a reason, right? Surely there would be something I was destined to do!*

*Okay, maybe I should give that whole thing a positive spin. Maybe there is something in store for me. Like, I could become one of the astronauts, being one of the first humans on the moon? That title had already been claimed on my world, with new moon missions only available for the super rich and special pilots that were trained for years.*

*Oh right, I almost forgot that I'm a hunted criminal. I never would get to fly to space in this world. Or anywhere else at the rate things were going.*

Remembering once again I had no real future in this world, the rest of my motivation to even survive just left my body.

*Dear god, if you are listening to me, please reincarnate me next time in a world of science fiction with space battles, aliens and laser guns. Thank you.*

“Hey, Olivia. How about we just give up running away and I just get myself arrested?” I jokingly asked Olivia.

“I wouldn't recommend that. Even though we wanted to scrap the death sentence already more than hundred years ago, many nobles were clinging to it. And even if it had been abolished, it would not end any better for you. They would just put you in a single cell, making sure you will never see the light of day or another person ever again. Putting you in a normal cell with other prisoners is no option as it would just get you killed considering how many enemies you have.”

“I am sorry I asked something this stupid. Please forget about it.”

*This world was scary. Not that it would have been better in my old world, I guess.*

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Olivia nervously glanced around, her face frowning. “We need to go. The men in the suits are checking the people one by one. They must be searching for us.” She said, tucking my sleeve. Before I even could look around she had already taken my hand again, dragging me forward.

We turned around and tried to go the way back, but the men in suits were everywhere, inspecting each person as they arrived and went away. "If we leave now, it would be suspicious." I whispered, to which Olivia nodded.

"I would bet that there are also some inside the crowd. I know how Theodore works."

"So what are we supposed to do in that case? You know any secret passages or something, o ancient tour guide?" I asked her, panic starting to creep up in me, but she only gave me an angry look. *Did I say something wrong?*

"Can you run?" she asked me, but I shook my head. My leg started hurting more and more the longer we went on and my head still felt dizzy. If I would start to run, I might not make it far.

"Then let us wait for the next family to leave. We will just tag along, trying to mix next to their kids. Maybe they will ignore us." She said, looking around for such a family, pointing at one such group of people. "Those, let us go!"

We walked with fast pace to them, positioning ourselves to the left of them. Somewhat close enough to seem to appear to be with them, but not that close so they would notice. One of the men in black gave the head of the group a look, but right then a little child starting crying. The man turned away and did not muster the rest of the group and us passing him, a sad expression on his face.

*Did he just scare the child by looking at it and got embarrassed about that?*

"We have no choice but to go through the orphanage. There is a service tunnel leading to the railways underground. Not the best way to enter them, but our only chance now." Olivia looked around nervously, still dragging me along.

"You wont leave me in the orphanage, right?" I asked her, trying to lift the tension with a joke. "If you say something like *ancient guide* ever again I *will* leave you there."

"Sorry, it will never happen again, just please don't leave me behind!"

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We walked the way back, entering the plaza from before with the statue of Olivia and her family. It was empty for the most part now, only a few people were strolling around with their tired kids.

Olivia took me straight to a door located between two big gates that lead directly into a tower build into the wall around the keep.

"The big doors to the left lead to the keep courtyard, the right one had been leading into the barracks. Since those entries were a pain to open and close for the orphanage staff they installed the new door here. But unfortunately they sealed the stairs leading up. Such a shame, I had a lot of good memories up there."

Together we entered the circular room with two doors on the inside.

“They were scared that children would climb up there and fall down, so they just closed it off.” Olivia walked to a small door, putting her hand on it. “From up there you could see the whole city. And at night it felt like you could touch the stars... it was wonderful.” After a short moment she turned around. “Sorry, I... this place is filled with memories for me.” She apologized, but I just shook my head. “It’s okay. Take your time.”

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We entered the courtyard of the keep together, holding hands again for some reason.

The entrance into the massive medieval keep was a tall gate made of wood and iron with decorations all over it and a wicket next to it.

“Behind the gate is the old throne room. It’s being used as a eating hall for the children now since Shaha put the orphanage here. She wanted to save as many children as possible that had lost their parents after the big war more than two centuries ago, even inviting those from other countries that lost to us. That gave Julius a big headache, but he still supported her. In the end the other countries even thanked us for taking those orphans in.” Olivia started telling me about the past again, probably not even realizing it, but I did not mind.

“You mean the war in which Shaha became the battle god?” I remembered the picture in the palace with that Naga in the center.

“Yes. With my marriage to Julius the country I was born in and Krahenfels were united, creating the biggest nation on the continent at that time. The rest of the continent felt threatened and banded together, creating the first *united nations* with the goal to destroy us. On the last day of the battle the painting in the palace picturing Shaha was created.”

“Is it true that she killed hundreds of soldiers in that battle?” I asked her, remembering what the guide had told me.

“I only watched the skirmish from the walls. Shortly after the creation of the first united nations some nobles betrayed us, capturing every Naga we had accepted into our city and gifted them to the enemy. They tried to use them like wild monsters against us, but Shaha’s brother started a revolt against them and led them to our gates. He died protecting the other Nagas from the enemies pursuing them, saving everyone else. After his death... it was the first and last time I had ever seen Shaha being angry. And it was the only time I had been scared of her. When she returned from the battlefield on that day, she had been covered in wounds and blood from head to tail, making for an impressive sight. The soldiers told us later that she skirmished through the wall of spearheads pointing at them with raw violence, throwing

herself into the middle of the enemy forces, killing everyone around her without mercy.”

While she told me that she opened the small door to the eating hall, waving for me to get inside. The hall was devoid of persons, only two long rows of wooden tables on each side of the big room.

“Hello, is someone there?” A voice came from somewhere behind, sounding like an elderly woman.

“Mama Thesa, it is me!” Olivia shouted, closing the door. “Olivia? By Usamir! Is everything alright, my majesty? Are you hurt?” the voice shouted, a old woman coming with fast steps from a door further behind. She wore a black robe that reminded me of a nun outfit, her black and gray hair tied to a knot, wrinkles in her stern face. Carefully I pulled the hood deeper, hoping she would not recognize me.

Olivia took down her hood, presenting her face. “You know I cant get hurt. And please, stop with the majesty part already!”

The old woman went to Olivia, putting a hand on her cheek. “Oh, you really are okay. We all had been worried after the news of your kidnapping by that crazy killer. The kids even wanted to play heroes and tried becoming knights to save their queen! We had so much trouble holding them back!”

“I am sorry for causing you trouble, but really, nothing bad happened. I did not get kidnapped and there had been no real danger, I promise.” Olivia assured the woman.

“So the whole thing is over? Good, then please, go out and enjoy the festival. The other kids would surely love to see you being back. Or you can stay, I am in the middle of cooking dinner. Because *someone* has to do that!” The woman laughed a bit at the last part, now looking at me.

“Oh, and who is that friend you brought with you?”

*Please do not tell her who I am, please just say I am a friend. Olivia, I beg of you!* Olivia did not notice my pleading looks. “She is a person I am trying to help escape. So I am afraid I cant stay for now. And talking about leaving, would you please let us enter the old court magicians room?” She answered.

*Good, you did not say anything that might tell her who I am.* I gave Olivia a secret thumbs up when the old woman was not looking, but before I knew it she started lecturing me. “Does your friend not know good manners? Still wearing the hood inside! Please, take it off. Wearing them inside is disrespectful!” she said to me, looking really scary.

“Well... can I... wear it this time?” I asked her, holding it in place. “You can trust Thesa.” Olivia said to me, urging me to take it down. *Traitor!*

With shaking hands I slowly removed the hood, scared of how Thesa would react to me. And to no surprise she started shaking and getting pale. “Olivia! That is the

person they said that abducted you! Are you really not in danger? Is she not the mass murderer on the run everyone is looking for?"

I lowered my gaze. Even when I had been expecting that reaction it did still hurt my feelings. "I am." I confessed, my voice sounding weak.

"Oh, my! Please don't hurt Olivia. And please don't hurt the children! I will do anything you ask, so please show mercy, I beg of you!" the woman shouted, getting on the ground, prostrating before me.

"Mama Thesa, please. She did not abduct me, I am helping her out of my own volition. And while the situation is a bit complicated, she kind of is the person that killed all those people, but also she is not. Please trust me, she will not hurt anyone!" Olivia said with a firm voice.

"Your majesty...?" Thesa looked up, mustering me, then Olivia. A few moments of silence passed in which no one said anything.

"Are you really not being forced to say all this?" She shot a glare at me, letting me flinch a little. *She looks super scary!*

"I am not forcing her. In fact, I am only alive thanks to her since a lot of people are out to kill me for things I kind of did, but also kind of did not do." I said, my eyes still looking at the ground.

Thesa stood up, still wary of me. Olivia took my hand, squeezing it until I looked at her. "I know we can trust her." She reassured me before turning back to Thesa. The old woman mustered the hand we were holding with a furrowed brow. A long time filled with silence passed before she finally nodded. "If Olivia really trusts you that much, I will oblige. But please, tell me exactly what happened, since this whole thing also involves me now."

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She led us through the hall into a hallway.

"I don't know how I should explain this without it sounding like I completely made it up." I whispered to Olivia, but she only shrugged her shoulders. "I guess it is kind of hard believe." she whispered back, shrugging her shoulders. "Thank you, I know that myself." I hissed back, rolling my eyes.

"What are you whispering about? Did you not want to tell me something?" the woman asked, her voice sounding like she was scolding me.

"Uh... I guess it is hard to believe. But I actually came from another world and just woke up in this body. Until recently I had no idea what she had done before I took this body over. And now everyone accuses me of doing things I did not do. Crazy, right?" My voice was cracking, making it an octave higher. *I know this sounds like I completely made this story up! But it is the truth, I swear!*



“If that is supposed to be a joke I missed the part where I have to laugh.” She commented. *Is that old woman Gav in disguise?*

“Shaha was also from another world. And after spending time with her I decided to believe her.” Olivia stated, locking her arms with mine.

“If you say so.” Thesa merely replied without looking back, stopping before a door and fishing a big keychain out of her pocket. Carefully going through each one of the many big rusty keys with her hand she finally stopped at one, opening the door with it.

“Please step inside, I will lock it behind you.” She stretched her hand out, gesturing us inside. When we wanted to enter together, Thesa hold Olivia back so I would enter the circular room with a round table made of stone in the middle first. I could guess why she did that, but I had to trust Olivia now.

“Are you really sure about this? I can lock the door right now and call the police.” The old woman whispered, but I still could make her voice out.

“Yes. We both told you the truth. So please don’t tell anyone that we have been here. Her life is in danger.” Olivia whispered back, putting her hand to her chest. Thesa starred at her for a moment, then she nodded.

“I really hope you know what you are doing. Good luck.” She whispered back, then she turned to me. She mustered me, a dangerous glimmer in her eyes.

“One thing before I let you go. One of the victims on the list they published has been the former orphanage director, Mr. Kroskow, together with his kid. They had been good people. If it had not been for Olivia I would have locked you up in here and prayed for your execution. And even if she assures me that she trusts you and that you are telling the truth, do not think that it excuses any of the crimes that you committed.”

With that she closed the door behind Olivia, only the sound of a key being turned could be heard now.

“So she still hates me for that, even if I did not do it?” I asked, tears welling up in my eyes. *This felt unfair, and to be hated like this, even if it was a stranger, still hurt me.*

“Shima...” Olivia said, slowly reaching a hand out to me, but retracting it before it had reached me. “I am sure she would change her mind if she knew you better. But sadly we don’t have the for that.” She made her way to one of the walls where a small metal plate was located, removed the glove on her right hand and put her claws in the small slit, heaving the plate up that seemed to be heavier than it looked. I came to her side and helped her lifting the heavy plate, opening a small manhole with a ladder leading down.

“This had been built as an emergency exit from the tunnels under Krahenfels.” Olivia informed me before climbing the ladder down. I followed her, accidentally pulling the lid above us. It fell down with a loud clunk, closing the way we had entered.

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“So, why did you even fall in love with me in the first place? We had only known each other for a few hours by then.”

“You only ask that now?”

Our voices echoed through the long empty maintenance halls that seemed to go on forever.

“Yes, because your *o so ancient guide* has nothing to tell you about these tunnels.”

“You really want to know?”

“Otherwise I wouldn’t have asked.”

“It is a bit embarrassing, but if you insist...”

I took a deep breath, ignoring the blood flowing into my cheeks.

“I fell in love with you because you cared about me when I was just a homeless guy you could have ignored, but yet you tried to help me. And after I panicked and ran away, leaving you behind after you got shot, you still returned to save me. And you fended both attackers away, even after everything they told you. And you did not leave me behind to die, going so far to even carry me to safety, saving my life. It was like a shining white knight had appeared, rescuing me, stealing my heart. And you are the first person after a long time I actually like being close to.”

“I didn’t do most of that for you, but for the information you could have had.”

“But you did it anyway. And I fell in love with you.”

“...That is stupid. You could not have picked a worse person to fall for.”

“And yet I did fall for you. And to be honest, I almost peed my pants a little with those two fighting about who will kill me. You really were a hero for me there, you know?”

“Not *almost*. I washed them while Shozzo was removing the bullet from your shoulder.”

“...”

“Why are you getting red?”

“I just wish you had never told me this. Please, tell me that was only a joke. I would die from shame if that really happened.”

“Sorry, but I said nothing but the truth.”

I put my hands over my face, trying to hide my face from Olivia, who was chuckling beside me. “You meanie...” I muttered.

“Okay, next time I will let Shozzo do it.”

“...Please, do not.” I sighed, exhausted.

“So... about my feelings for you. You only said that you don’t know if you can return them, even though you promised to stay at my side until one of us dies. Does that

mean yes, but not now, or..." not wanting to formulate the last part of the sentence I waited for her answer.

"Who knows?" She said, giggling.

"You know! And I want to know, too!" I shouted, my face flushing.

"Silly. Do not force a girl to give you an answer like this. They will start hating you if you pressure them like this." She said, a smile on her face.

"I am also a girl, you know?" I countered.

"So you really are a girl now? Not a *boy at heart* anymore?"

"Ugh..." I could not retort anything to that.

"Now that I think about it, you really did change a bit. Telling me how you fell in love at your shining knight like you have been some damsel in distress. And to even include how I carried you back. Please tell me, where is the *boy in your heart* part in that *damsel in a distress* theme?"

"I-I am still a boy at heart! Please stop bullying me!" I shouted, my face feeling completely hot. *Maybe she was right, but still that did not mean I had to like it!*

"But to answer your question considering my feelings for you..." Olivia said, the smile disappearing from her face, transforming into a bitter expression.

"I..." she started. My heart stopped, I already knew what she wanted to say. But I did not say anything, seeing how conflicted she was, trying to find the right words to tell me.

"I am sorry. But right now... I do not think I could answer you on them." She finally brought out.

"I see." I said, trying to sound normal, but even I knew I failed at that.

"It is not... that I hate you. It is more... I do not know how I should go on with the whole situation. This is the first time in my life someone ever asked me out, and then there is the fact that I still am deeply in love with those two that are already dead for two hundred years. And there is this massive age gap between me and everyone else together with my appearance. I really, *really* am confused about all of this. And let us not even talk about the short amount of time we know each other or the circumstances of our situation." She continued, her voice strained.

"It's okay, Olivia. I understand. No need to force yourself." I forced myself to smile, even though I actually wanted to cry. "I am not worth it anyway." I silently added under my breath so she could not hear it.

"Sorry... and thank you." Olivia said, bringing our conversation to an end. An awkward silence hang around us for the rest of the way.

## 9: The Past Precedes

After a long walk through sheer endless halls we finally arrived at the lowest part. What greeted us here were rows and rows of trains, standing on rails that filled the complete hall, countless wagons for freight behind them.

“So, which one does go to the swamp?” I asked the girl next to me.

“Beat me. Also I never said *to* the swamps. Just *through*.” She answered, shrugging her shoulders.

“Did you hear anything?” a voice came from farther down the trains, somewhere between them. Olivia and I exchanged a look, starting to run to the next container with two open doors, hiding inside and crawling away from the doors to the end of the container, hoping no one would see us here in the shadows.

My leg had started hurting more from the pain and I could feel that my trousers were getting wet again. The wound on my right thigh must have opened.

“Are you sure you heard something?” a voice asked outside.

“Yes, sir.” another answered.

“I see. Go inform the others. I will bring this to an end.”

*Wasn't that the voice from the old fart? Why would he even be here?*

Slowly we heard steps coming closer outside the wagon, but we were trapped inside. The empty container echoed every sound we made and would alarm him of our position. Crawling into the back of this container had been a bad idea, cutting off our only escape route with the two doors at the other end. The only thing we could do now was to wait for him to go away, or to hope that he would miss us in the shadows. But, as fate would have it, we were not so lucky. I could see a shadow getting bigger, approaching the door, and then a figure hopped on, pressing a switch next to the door. Small lights on the ceiling started to glow, showering the room in a dim light. *They have electric lights in a freight container?!*

“You really ended up here. My agents saw you on the parade, disappearing after the government agents appeared. I figured with patrols looking for you on every exit that this would be the only place you could show up.” the man explained, pulling a revolver out of his pocket, closing the doors to his side with the other hand.

“What a nice location for a duel between us. Just us here. And no way for you to run away this time.” he laughed, as if there had been something funny about what he just said.

“But I wonder, why are you still with her? You gonna protect her this time, too?” He said, pointing the weapon now at Olivia. She did not answer him, slowly putting herself before me.

*He did not prepare his revolver to shoot yet. Last time he always cocked the hammer before shooting, but for some reason he did not do so now. Does he want to talk for now? Maybe I can actually convince him of letting us go. Okay, that might be just a dream. But one can hope, right?*

“Did she gain your trust? Did she say something that made you want to protect her? That maybe being just *exactly* what you wanted to hear?” The old fart continued.

“What...?” I muttered. This seemed to go into a very dangerous direction. But the man did not stop. “Really, that wouldn’t surprise me. I know how she approaches her targets. I have seen it often enough as her guardian.”

Olivia still said nothing. She was standing before me, leaving me unable to see her face. Unconsciously I put my hand on the hole in my shoulder.

“You want to know? Before you take another bullet to your heart?” The man said, pulling out a smoke with his free hand and then lighting it up, letting out a small cough. Olivia still did not say anything, nor did she move.

“Shara is a really skilled assassin. It’s not the masses of kills or her age that made her legendary. It is the way she works. How she operates.”

He laughed again, his voice hoarse, blowing smoke up that carried its stench back to us after it gathered under the ceiling.

“She can get close to any target in just a few hours. Gaining their trust, sweet talking them, knowing exactly what she has to say so they will literally fall for her. Or rather, obey her. Really, that girl is an actress of the highest caliber. She can read people like open books, no matter who.”

Olivia was staying silent, still not moving.

“She even betrayed her own father. Set him up after he vehemently objected to her continuing the assassin trade. Did you see those broken glasses she brings with her everywhere? She told me how they were a symbol for her to never become like him. A symbol to do everything exactly the opposite the way he did or wished for her to do. Hence she kills everyone without mercy, the opposite of the way he had done it. And that is why she was not wearing glasses herself, rather going blind than just being similar to him in the slightest.”

“She... did that? Had she been crazy?” I muttered.

“And then that girl told me she was gonna leave the organization. Wearing those very glasses and declaring war, ignoring her orders. Would you, your majesty, be so kind to explain me what I should make of this?”

Olivia was silent, still not moving.

“I will tell you what I see. That girl is putting together the biggest act of her life. She is going to use you, having found a big target she is trying to kill, and you are just a tool for her. Or maybe even still the target herself. I never know what that little monster is *exactly* thinking. But I know her long enough that I can guess that she is planning *something*.”

“Olivia... I...” I started saying, but I could not bring myself to finish that sentence. If I would deny what he said, it would sound like I would play right into his hands, sowing distrust in Olivia. But staying silent wouldn’t be any better.

“So, majesty, I think it would be better if you just took a step to the side and let me finish my job. The best outcome for all of us, really.” The man continued, now cocking the hammer of his revolver.

“Olivia... I...” I started again, stopping again. But then I shook my head, having finally decided what I would say. *The honest truth. What I already had decided some time ago. To not rely on others, to not let them betray me again.*

“Olivia. If you still do not trust me, it’s okay. I never thought I would survive all of this anyway, so if we just let it end here, I think...” tears came falling from my eyes while I forced down my urge to say what I really wanted, forcing a smile on my face.

“I think it would be best to let him just kill me. But whatever happens, I want you to know that I am very thankful for everything you did for me.” I put a hand on her shoulder, stepping before her, right in the line of his barrel.

“You idiot!” Olivia screamed, pushing me back and causing me to fall just when the shot fell. I could see something going through her arm. But she ignored it, looking angrily down at me.

“I already promised you, did you not remember? And even if you did lie, at this point I would still not break it!” She shouted, seeming really angry at me.

“Too bad, majesty.” The man said, just pulling the trigger two more times without even bothering to cock the hammer, the repeated gunshots echoing in the container feeling like they were bursting my ears. The first bullet landed in Olivias chest, the next one in her head, leaving a red point on her temple, a small drop of blood rolling down her face.

“Olivia!” I screamed, getting back on my shaking legs while staring at her blood. *She never doubted me! She promised me to never betray and leave me and she stayed true to it even now! How... how did I deserve this amount of trust? Why did she go so far for me?*

“I guess we both have around five minutes of private time. Four minutes until her heart will beat again, and then maybe a minute until she remembers where we even are.”

The old fart sounded cold, his barrel still pointed at me.

“Surprised, eh? That is a double action revolver. No need to cock the hammer on this

one to turn the cylinder. One of its drawbacks is the smaller caliber. But to kill you it will suffice, Shara.”

“Shara is dead!” I screamed, panicking. “She has been dead since over a month! And I doubt she will ever return!” I continued. “You have the wrong one, old fart! Just please, leave me alone!”

“How so? You are standing here right in front of me. And as much as I can see you pretty much carry yourself like you always do when you act. Even the way you call me *old fart*, just like always. You are pretty much alive, even if you abandon your old ties.”

*The way I call you old fart...? Wait, why did I even call him that in the first place? He had always been nice to me when I started with that, I never had a reason to give him that name. So... why? Why did I call him that?*

“No! I am not from this world! I just woke up in this body! I have no memories of anything that even happened before I came here!” I screamed.

“Pretty hard to believe from someone who had always been so good at pretending. Even if you said the truth, why should I believe you?”

I gritted my teeth. *Did his name come up into my mind the same way the language did? Or did the old owner of the body never die? Is she maybe still dormant somewhere in me? No, surely that would have showed in my behaviour, right? Right?*

“The time for talking is over. Draw your knives. Let us end this.” the old fa- *the old man* said, shaking his head.

With shaking hands I reached into my pocket, taking the knives out. I tried to take each one of them into one hand, only to let them both fall on the ground. Nervously I looked back up on the man, but he was still not doing anything, just watching me silently.

Not sure if he would shoot at me when I was not looking at him, I crouched down anyway, taking up a knife, deciding to hold it with both hands so I would not drop it again. “Do we really have to do this?” I pleaded to him. But he said nothing, positioning his feet differently, lifting the revolver more and aiming at me with the iron sight.

*I can do this. I can do this. I can do this.* I repeated that thought, trying to calm myself down, but my heart was still beating loudly, my legs suddenly felt heavy and my shoulder send out a stabbing pain. “Please, I beg you!” I shouted, but the old man only cocked the hammer back.

Unable to do anything else I started running, throwing myself to the side at random, and then again. I glanced at the man, seeing him pull the trigger while I still did not make it halfway to him.

The sound of a gunshot rang in my ears, just as loud as before. A sharp pain stabbed through my upper left arm, throwing me slightly out of line. Ignoring the pain I continued running towards the man.

Without hesitation he started pulling the trigger again, the barrel aimed at my head. Again the gunshot rang through the container.

Something fast went past my head and made a metallic sound behind me.

*What? Why did he...?!*

With a few steps I closed the gap between us, pushing the knife in my hands toward the still smiling man. He lifted his left hand to protect himself from the knife, not even trying to evade it. I could feel the resistance of his flesh while the knife was burrowing itself into his arm, the tip of it reappearing on the other side, blood flowing out in great quantity. Shocked by the sight I let go of the knife that was stuck in his arm, falling on my butt.

*Maybe I am scared of blood, okay? Maybe that was one of the reasons I ran away in the alley, the reason I always let Olivia change the bandages and the reason I started to shout at the man after seeing Olivias blood right now or the reason why I screamed after I had seen the first period I had!*

The old fa- man let his revolver fall to the ground and fell backwards against the wall, slowly sliding down on his butt.

"I lost. Congratulations." He said, a smile on his face.

"Why...?!" I starred at him.

"Why did you miss the shot? Why did you not finish me after I stabbed you?" I continued, trying to understand what happened.

The old man laughed out loud. Then he just kicked the revolver to me with his foot, ignoring the knife still stuck in his arm.

I picked it carefully up, looking at him. He just pointed at the gun. "Check the cylinder." I tried to do as he said, mimicking the way the people opened them in games, only to fail. After trying it a few more times and inspecting the weapon closely I finally made it. There were only five chambers, every shell already used.

*That explained why he did not finish me, but not why he pulled away his gun in the last moment, missing my head in the end.*

"You know, your father really loved you. I am sure he knew that you had set him up in the end. But still he asked me to protect you with everything I have." the man started explaining.

"I already told you! I am not Shara. And I never will be!" I insisted, finally crawling to him, taking his arm and looking at the wound.

"What are you doing?" he asked me angrily.

"Treating your wound, of course." I said, immediately regretting having looked at the bloody mess the first place.



“Don’t bother. I lost twice. My days as the head of the assassins are over now one way or the other. My death is guaranteed *and* planned.” He said, pushing me back.

“I-” I started, but he interrupted me.

“And I already noticed in the fight. No matter how perfect Shara played her targets, the moment she picked up her knives she had always been the same, making it seem almost like she was dancing. Dancing like a bloody killing machine, every motion perfectly deadly.”

“... So you believe me?”

“No. I really do not. Or at least, I think I shouldn’t. But somehow... maybe even that is part of the act. I can’t be sure. Not with you.” He started laughing again, only to interrupt it with a unhealthy sounding coughing attack.

He ignored it and pulled out a smoke, lighting it up and putting it to his mouth.

There was a rustling of clothes behind me. *Did Olivia wake up?*

“The piece of paper you gave me back then in the forest... what had it been about?” I asked the man, the question lingering in the back of my mind for some time now.

“That? Oh, that was an invitation to take my place. Easy work, just give a few people a motivating speech after their first kill, shout at someone failing and get rid of those that try to leave or ignore the rules. Simple, but something that would not put your- or rather, *Sharas* life at risk. After all, I still look out for her.”

“So that is why you always showed yourself to me instead of silently getting rid of me?”

“Exactly.”

Now I started laughing a little. “I wish Shara could hear that, even if she sounds like a monster. And...” I paused a moment. “I am sorry I stole her body...”

“Sure, sure. Whatever you say.” The man waved me off, still smoking his cigarette. “Just know that even if you wouldn’t have stabbed me I would die. Those things...” He pointed at his smoke. “They already infested my lungs. I had been coughing blood the last year, but it gets only worse. And I still cant stop smoking them like crazy. That was why I wanted to get Shara in that position as soon as possible.” He shook his head. “In the end I never could protect Shara the way I promised him. But now I at least...”

He sounded dejected, his voice grew silent. His right arm silently moved to his side, clutching his pocket. I noticed that the color of his face was drained, the blood that had been flowing from his arm forming a great puddle beneath him, the stream still not stopping. It seems I had hit an important artery.

“I just... want you to know one thing. I hope you know... that you will die sooner or later. The more you run... the more you will suffer. But still... good luck... to you...”

I nodded. “I already knew. But I promised with Olivia to fight for my survival. And maybe I can win, even against all odds.”

“Sure...”

The man closed his eyes, his breath getting more shallow until his chest stopped moving.

*I killed him. I was the one that killed him. It was me. He just died before my eyes. And I was the one responsible. I just killed a man.*

The almost completely burned cigarette fell from his mouth into the pool of blood, producing a hissing sound.

“Where... am I?” asked a voice behind me. “What... is he okay? What happened? And who are you?” Olivia asked me, her voice sounding confused.

I stood up, trying to support myself with my left arm, only to let out a small cry of pain. I forgot that I had been shot there

“It’s me, Shima. I survived, but I...” I paused a moment, not sure what to say. “He is dead.” I finally told her, reaching for her arm with my right hand and opening the door of the container with my foot to lead her outside.

“Where are we going, Shi... Shima?” She asked me, looking around like she had never seen this place before.

“I don’t know.” I replied honestly.

“There were shots reported around here! Get out, we will flush them out. Prepare your crossbows! Don’t let that woman escape again!” a voice shouted farther down the trains. Not knowing where else to go, I dragged Olivia back to the entrance from which we had entered the hall.

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“Where are we?” Olivia asked me, running behind me.

“You already asked that before.” I grumbled, dragging my left leg forward, ignoring the pain. “We are in the tunnels under the city.”

“Oh, I never knew we had those! Mama and Papa never told me about them.” She wondered, touching curiously the wall.

“Say, Shima, are you one of my servants or my guards?”

I stopped, turning around to her. “What?” I asked her, my eyes narrowing. “Well, you are not dressed like one of those, but you are bleeding and fleeing with me from those scary people that are shouting. So you could be both of those, but I do not remember, sorry...”

She looked at me with big, round eyes, somehow giving me the feeling of speaking with a child.

“Oh, or are you a teacher? I am sorry in that case, Mr. Shima!”

*Mr. Shima?* I almost shouted from surprise, even forgetting to answer the usual way.

“Maybe the culprit has gone up here. Clear the hallway!” A voice behind us shouted, many loud footsteps following.

“Crap!” I grabbed Olivias arm again, ignoring the pain in my leg to run with her away from the men. Shortly after we reached two staircases, one leading up and one leading down. Without thinking I took the stairs up, flinching with each step on the way, hating myself for not having chosen the other way that would have been easier on my leg.

Once we arrived at the top I chose the way to the right which promptly led to a dead end with a metal door. In panic I threw it open to see another staircase going up with a small space under it.

Hearing the footsteps behind us I wanted to continue running, but my leg had already been protesting on the last trip up the stairs. Not knowing what else to do I forced Olivia and myself under the staircase in a tight embrace, hoping they would not check here.

Just barely after getting in cover the door flew open and someone entered the room. It approached the stairs, coming closer, but just before they reached us a new sound could be heard.

Above us a door was kicked open, followed by heavy steps.

“Police, hands up!” the voice near us shouted, a click could be heard.

“Put your crossbow down, I am with the government. We are hunting two fugitives that are heavily armed. Do not get in our way.” the other voice above us shouted.

“Governme-” Olivia started to whisper, but I threw a hand over her mouth, hoping they did no hear her.

“We are also on the hunt for some criminal. We had a report incoming about a suspicious woman sneaking around followed gunshots coming from the southern train hall and found a dead man together with an empty black powder gun. The body was still warm, so we assume the culprit is still on the run.” the man near us said. Olivia seemed like she wanted to say something to that, but I still hold my hand over her mouth.

“In that case continue your search on your floor, we will keep our eyes open on this floor. If you see one of our targets, report directly to us, we will do the same.”

“Yes, sir!”

The voices went back, two doors could be heard slamming back in their frame. We were alone again.

“Mhm!” Olivia bit into my hand over her mouth, trying to escape from my embrace. “Sorry, sorry.” I said while chuckling, letting her go.

“Are they searching for you? And did *you* kill that man?” she asked, her voice sounding incredibly innocent.

"I... they are searching for us, but if they find us, we both lose." I answered, looking at the bloody hole in my arm. It was still bleeding, making me flinch a little. I probably should put something around it.

I ripped my shirt under my jacket, getting a long piece of fabric. Carefully I rolled up the sleeve of my shirt, exposing the wound, regretting it instantly.

"Olivia, would you maybe apply that bandage?" I asked her, looking away.

"Sure!" she said while smiling, crawling back to me.

She stretched out her tongue, trying her best to bandage my arm. It was the first time I had seen her like this. "Do you remember anything?" I asked her, hoping she would still at least know something about our situation.

"Remember? Did I forget something? Or do you mean what I should be doing?" She continued wrapping the bandage around my arm, her fingers slipping of time and time again, forcing her to start over again.

"Yes, what were you supposed to do?" I asked her, urging her on to continue.

"I think I should take lessons now on how to please the prince in the bedchamber. Also there was dancing and writing etiquette planned today. Oh, and I should not forget the general etiquette classes. History should also be today... I think?" She finally completed the bandage while talking.

*Those lessons give me a bad feeling...*

With a sigh I rolled the sleeve back down, glad I did not have to look at it now.

"Say, how old are you?" I continued. Olivia never told me her age, but she should be around two hundred and fifty years old as far as I knew.

"I am eight! And in three years I will get to marry prince Julius!" she declared proudly, a fist on her chest.

"You are... eight? And you already... take lessons on how to please your husband?" I muttered. *I mean, education about biology starts early these days. But still, that does not seem right. Is this really something she should be supposed to learn?*

"Mama and Papa say that Julius and I had been destined to be married the day I had been born! And they say that we should get a heir as soon as possible. That is why I am in those lessons instead of learning how to deal with politics, math and governmental affairs. But those things are boring anyway!"

*Julius... that means king Markus Julius Rothwin. He only had been a prince at that time.*

"But I am already writing my own letters to him. I never met him personally, but he always seems so nice and sweet, always treating me like an equal and listening to me. I am sure he is a great person!" she continued, a happy smile on her face.

I nodded, looking at the wound in my leg. There were two bloody spots on my trousers, one on each side, the blood staining the ground where it had touched it.

“But they say he had taken a mistress shortly after I packed my things. Saying mean things like he would mate with a monster, charmed by her after he lost his mind. Those visitors of my parents always tell me that I should not marry that man when my parents are not listening! He would never do that if he has me! I mean, he does always seem so nice and loyal...” Olivia went suddenly kind of sad.

“Pack your things? But you said it would marry him in three years?” I asked her, but she shook her head.

“No, I am turning eleven in spring!” *Huh? But you just said you were eight?!* “I always dreamed of meeting with him, and we will marry when I turn twelve. Some teachers say that is too young, but I already love him, no matter what they say!” She now puffed her cheeks, seeming angry.

*I see a lot of problems with that, too. You should listen to your teachers, young Olivia.* “And it is my duty to have an heir as soon as possible for my country! My parents always tell me so!” She continued, sounding proud for some reason.

“But what if he only pretends? Or what if he is not like you imagine? Are you not scared?” I asked her, trying to move my leg a bit again. It still hurt, but the small break helped.

“I’m not scared!” She shouted, much to my dismay. But it seems nobody heard her, so I let her continue. “Well... maybe I am. I have to move away from my home, leave my parents and live with someone I never met in another country with a different culture. They even have completely different food there and my favorite cook will not come with me. Also I still am scared of that weird mistress or pet or whatever the people are talking about. She is supposed to be some monster and share the room with him. What if he loves that thing more than me? What if I am not good enough...?” her eyes got teary.

“Olivia...” I silently muttered. Her childhood did not seem to be an easy one. I guess being a princess was no fun thing if it meant that such things would happen.

*But I already knew how it would turn out. That Julius is someone who is dead for two hundred years and she still rejected me over him. And that other pet or mistress has to be Shaha. So it did turn out good for her.*

I finally felt rested enough to stand up again and crawled out under the stairs. Olivia followed me, clinging to my sleeve.

“Where are we going?” She asked me again. “I would also like to know.” I answered, peeking back out of the door we came in. No one was there and I couldn’t hear any steps. *Did they already search this whole floor and moved on to the next one? And what was with what the people said above? Are they hunting us, too?*

“Say, why are you hurt?” Olivia asked me when we were back in the hallway.

I groaned at that question. When she lost her memories she could really be quite something, even if her worrying about me did make me glad..

“May I tell you a story?” I asked her.

“Sure! Is it a love story? I love those!” *Of course you do...*

“It is a story about me and a girl I love, yes. After that girl saved me from death, I fell head over heels for her, confessing to her in the heat of the moment.” I started, dragging her along the long hallways. *If only they had added some signs here, but no, not a single one in sight! Why would you need a damn sign in a labyrinth in the first place? No one would get ever lost here, for sure!*

“I met that girl first on the street, but then later I found myself forced to poison a person after finding out that I had done some bad things in my past.”

“Are you a bad guy, mister?”

“No, I am not a bad guy, rather I am in the body of the one who was a bad guy. But now everyone thinks its me. So they all treat me like her.”

I glanced around the corner, but it was empty.

“Anyway, about that person I had to poison... turns out it was the person I already quite liked at that point. And I only noticed that after I prepared the poison and she was about to drink it. I had been really scared, thinking I would be the one to kill her.”

“A dramatic love story! But if you tried to poison her, wouldn’t she hate you?” Olivia asked me from behind while I was thinking about which way we should go next at the junction.

“She had noticed right away, but she still invited me to dance with her. And after that she even took me on a date.” I told her, a slight smile on my face.

“So she did not hate you!” she stated, impressed.

I nodded, finally deciding for a direction at random. A few loud bangs came from the ceiling above us, but it was silent on our floor.

“I would love to think so. But on that day we met an old man and a lady who told us what bad things I had done. And they were really bad, so bad indeed that the whole world started to hunt me the next day.”

“And how did the woman react?” she urged me to continue, pulling my sleeve. I opened the door next to us, but it only was another staircase leading up.

“She stayed with me. Protected me. I fell in love with her. And after that she carried me to safety, caring for my wounds, saying she wanted to stay with me. Convincing me to not give up on life.”

“So she likes you!” Olivia stated, her voice excited.

“But after I told her my feelings that time she kind of did not answer about her own. And when we started to run away together, I thought we had grown closer, holding hands all the time.”

“But if she stayed with you, she should *really* like you, right? Or did you do something bad to her?”

“I... I did not. We even had something resembling a second date today.” I sighed, returning to the junction and taking the other way.

“Anyway, I asked her again, wanting to know what she felt for me. And then she rejected me. Because of someone that has been dead for a long time now.”

“That... sounds rough. But are you sure though that she meant it like that? I mean if you really love someone, it might be hard to move on. If I would imagine my prince Julius to die one day, I would probably be very sad about it all my life!”

I laughed at that. Yeah, she truly was Olivia, even if she was younger in her mind. “But you know, after that some things happened. And now I do not even know how I should talk to that girl if I meet her again.” I sighed.

“Today I did something I never wanted to ever do. And I never had been prepared to do it either. I thought I might be ready to do something like that naturally if I would come into a fantasy world. That something like that would just be something happening in the flow of events with no consequences like in stories. But today... I just *killed* a person. He said he would die anyway, but *I* did it. And that is... I hate it. I only defended myself, but I...” tears broke out from my eyes.

“I do not know how I should tell her that. That I killed someone after she trusted me so much that I am not that bad person everyone said I was!”

I fell to the side, my hands on my face, my tears rolling. My shoulder hit the wall while I got on my knees, letting my feelings out.

“I am scared of what I have done. But I am even more scared of losing the only ally I have. I would be completely alone! I don’t know what I should do or where I should go! I don’t want to lose her! I am scared of her leaving me after she promised she would not! And that after she *proved* me that she wouldn’t do that! I am so *utterly* and *completely* pathetic!” I let it out, telling the Olivia who had lost her memories what I was scared of, letting everything out.

Olivia did not say anything. But then I felt a hand on my back, slowly petting me before something warm embraced me. Olivia had hugged me from behind. “I am sure she will forgive you, mister. I mean, how could you be a bad person if something like this makes you feel so bad?”

*But will she? I still question it. I still question her motivation, I still question that she stays with me. That she just ignores the warnings the other people give her, ignore the things she got told, those things being something that basically destroys every bit of trust she could ever have had in me. Why? Why did she stay? Why did she scream idiot before she threw me to the side, letting me dodge the bullet?*

*What did she think? Was it really because she promised me? Was it really just because of that single promise?*

I crumbled even more to the ground, my knees sliding to the side, my butt on the ground. "Was that promise really that important to you? Do you really ignore every red flag only to follow me, knowing that I could lie to you all the time? Why? Olivia, I don't understand! I- I really don't understand! Why would you do that? Why would you do something so stupid, and that for *me* of all people? I don't understand!"

Olivia hugged me tighter, not letting go of me.

"The person you were talking about was me?" She sounded a bit confused, but still continued holding me.

"I am sorry... I do not remember anything about that. I was just in North Harkur in one moment, and then I somehow got here..."

For some reason Olivia apologized, starting to go through my hair with her hand. "So that is why the person you were talking about was not with us. And if I do not remember anything, you probably are protecting me right now. Thank you, mister."

"I am a girl..." I sobbed, trying to calm down.

That she thanked me even after she forgot what happened... she was too sweet. I leaned back a little, enjoying her warmth.

*For now she was still with me, giving me strength and staying with me even when she did not know anything. Maybe I just was thinking about it too much. Maybe she just was a stubborn girl, always going her own way.*

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"We got them!" the knights shouted, but I just scoffed at them. I already had prepared the automatic crossbow gun I had used in the escape after the bank robbery. Now together with Alis spinning the wheel it I could fire on the knights trying to rush our hideout.

We only had one entrance they could know about. Of course we had a secret escape route, or I would never have chosen this spot. The only reason it came to this shootout was the speed with that they had operated, surprising even me.

It was like they already knew we would be here. Someone must have sold me out, but as much as I would like to suspect the moron with white hair, he could not have known about this place.

I clicked with my tongue, continuing to aim at the small passage that was the entrance. The soldiers hid behind the walls to the left and right, only peeking out when the bolts stopped for a moment.

"Alis, I know you are not completely recovered yet. Tell me if we need to change roles." I muttered, giving her a quick glance.

"I fear before that happens we will run out of bolts. We shot already through three quarters of our supplies." She said with a calm voice, knowing that I still had a



emergency plan. And just when she said that a small canister was thrown inside our room, made out of metal. I quickly aimed at it, but the moment the bolt hit it, smoke started appearing, burning in my eyes and my nose.

“Shit!” I screamed, pulling my sweater over my nose and grabbing Alis hand. We had to leave this room, they really had been prepared for this.

I pulled my coughing sister with me, dragging her to the vent that would make our escape route. I never thought they would use gas, or even attack this place in the first place. So the escape route had not been sealed in anyway, meaning that the smoke was following us down the ladder.

We reached an emergency staircase below the room, heavy steps storming the room above us.

Alis was still coughing while climbing down, taking her time. She had lost a lot of blood after she was shot and the healing stone did not restore it, it only had fixed the wounds. If I had hesitated just a few more seconds back then I might have lost her, I knew that. But for now she was safe, and I would keep it that way.

“Sorry... Gav. I am still... just...” she said, coughs between each word. “No, you are not dragging me down. You are the very reason I am even doing this in the first place.” I told her, putting her over my shoulder, running further down the tunnels. If they found me down here in my hideout, we would not last a minute on the surface. “How did they find us this fast?” Alis asked, her voice getting clearer now.

“I only told my most trusted agent in the guild hall about that place...” I muttered, getting a very bad feeling.

*Why did they not hunt us after the bank robbery? Did they really just want to put it under the rug? Did I really sting them so hard they wanted to hide it? Or was it the other way around, were they playing with us, waiting for us to expose ourselves?*

I gritted my teeth in anger. “We are going to the head of the snake. It is the only thing I can think of right now.” I said, letting Alis down again, getting a plan of the tunnels out of my pocket.

“All my plans until now failed. Maybe they will anticipate our next move, but we have no other choice. Or rather, I do have no other choice. I made too many mistakes.” I muttered.

I handed Alis the map, showing her a location on it. “This might place might be safe for now, but only one person fits inside that locker. Please wait there for me, and if I do not return after three hours, run.”

She shook her head. “No, we were together in this from the start. I will not leave you now to go alone.”

I sighed. She had already put her head to it, and if I would protest her answer surely would only be “but you said I was not dragging you down”, forcing me to take her with me anyway.

“Also you told me I was not dragging you down, so you should rely on me!” she said, a smile on her face. “After all I want to protect you too!”

*I knew it.*

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I was on my feet again, but I had problems moving my left leg now, so Olivia had to support me. She still had not recovered her memory and was drifting through the past.

Sometimes she was wildly jumping forth in time, the last state having been after Julius died, leading to her silently shedding tears.

For some reasons the black suits were also running around, forcing us to stay silent and sneak around the hallway, only evading them by sheer luck until now.

But we were trapped between two hallways without any doors, those men closing in slowly on our positions.

“Huh? I wanted to read books... how did I come here?” Olivia was looking around, now probably in another phase of her live. “Please, be silent.” I whispered to her, carefully glancing around the corner. The two men in black suits did not seem to have heard us and continued staying on the junction, each one of them watching a direction. I turned back, going the other way. I already knew there was another group of them coming, but maybe they had turned back if we were lucky.

Only to almost run into them when they came around the corner. We were standing across each other, only a meter between us, staring at each other for half a second.

In the same moment the men and I began moving. “Hey, stop!” one of the shouted, the other one lifting his crossbow, aiming it at me. I spun around, grabbing Olivias hand again, and started running as fast as I could, ignoring my leg that hurt so bad I had to support myself on Olivias shoulder just a second before.

“We found the assassin with the queen!” a voice behind us shouted, informing the men that I just saw at the junction. They reacted instantly, drawing their crossbows and blocking our only way out, trapping us between those two.

“Surrender and we will not hurt you.” One of them said, his crossbow aimed at my head.

“What is going on?” Olivia asked, watching them with a tilted head. “Is there a reason you are pointing your weapons on the person accompanying me?” she continued, putting a hand on my shoulder.

“Olivia?” I asked her, confused. Did she regain her memories?

“She is accused of killing a lot of people and taking you hostage. Please step away from her, my majesty.” another man said.

“What? You are?” She turned her head to me, the shock visible in her face. *I am done for. Olivia not remembering me now is my doom.* That shocked face proved to much for me, I only closed my eyes, trying to accept what would happen now.

“But you never hurt me, and you are wounded... did you really take me hostage?” She tilted her head, now looking at the men in black. “I do not know your uniforms. You do not look like knights of the kingdom of Harkur, so please tell me who gave you authority!”

I opened my eyes again, surprised by that. Even when she did not remember me, she still was protecting me.

“My majesty! We are government agents! You have seen us already plenty of times. Or is the woman threatening you?” the man who had spoken before now asked, the shock on his face.

“Step away from her now, or I will shoot you on the spot!” his partner screamed at me.

“He did not threaten me in any way!” She placed herself between us. “I never heard anything of these *government agents*, and I am the princess of this country, even if I spend all the time in my room. Do not take me for a fool!” she continued, putting both her hands on her hips.

“If you really want to arrest someone with those accusations, I wish to see the person giving you orders first. Please get him here.” She looked each of them in the eye, the resolve clear on her face.

The two man that had been at the junction whispered to each other and nodded. “If your majesty orders it, we have to obey. But we cannot bring the man here, so you will need to come with us. And for the girl with you, we will need to put handcuffs on her.” He glared at me now. “If you resist we will not hesitate to shoot you on the spot.”

Before I could even react the men behind us were grabbing my hands, pushing me down on the ground and putting the handcuffs on while checking my body for weapons. It happened in an instant, but in that time they already had separated Olivia from me, talking to her alone.

“I am absolutely sure! And no, I still do not trust you, so he will remain at my side until I say otherwise!” I could hear her shout while the man was pulling me on my legs by the handcuffs, letting me groan from pain. “She is a girl, and her name is Shara.” One of the men informed her, but got out of her way.

“Shara? An variation on Shaha? Her parents must really love her.” Olivia wondered, having the same reaction to the real name of this body again. And, like it was the place she belonged, she started walking next to me, ignoring the protests of the

men in black suits, while they forcibly pushed me, holding my right shoulder, ignoring the painful look I gave them for pressing on my old gun wound.

*It's over. I have been arrested, Olivia does not remember anything and there is no chance to escape. Maybe I will have a few days before I get the death sentence, but honestly, I would rather die instantly than having to wait for it.*

*I swear, I will never wish to be brought into another world ever again. I should have just ignored the things I had seen back then. I should have ignored my pride, my desire to play hero, my morals. And I should have never trusted anyone. Not my parents, not the girl claiming to love me, not that lawyer, not my superior, no one. If I hadn't done that, I would never have tried to jump! I would never have come to this stupid world!*

*...and never would have met Olivia.*

I clenched my fists, angry at myself. My whole life has been a mess, in both worlds. And yet I felt glad I met her. She stayed true to her promise even after she lost her memories. Even after she heard the worst things about me.

*Even after everything that happened... I still felt glad that I came to this world somehow. Felt happy that I met her. Even after I thought I could never open myself up to anyone ever again. After I thought I would reject everyone coming near me.*

*So even if I die soon... thank you, Olivia*

## **10: Until Death Do Us Part**

The men took us some hallways down until we arrived at a broken door. They looked at each other at the sight, unsure how they should interpret the dented metal door hanging only on a single hinge.

But they chose to ignore it in the end, forcing us to go forward.

"I wonder how Lina is doing. I haven't seen her a long time." Olivia muttered next to me, having reached another part of her life in her memories. She noticed me looking at her, starting to smile. "She is an Arachnea, one of these spider humanoid monster ones. I know most people avoid them, but she really is a good servant for me. Even when she always annoys me, forcing me to stop trying to kill myself and urges me to socialise more." She chuckled.

"Majesty?" the man behind her asked with a shocked voice, but he dared not to say anything more.

“She also was the reason there are metal bars on my windows. The first day she started working, replacing my old servant, I had thrown myself the first time out of the window. And after I splashed on the ground before her the third time she got so angry even the *king* moved to please her!” She laughed again, the men around us exchanging weird looks between them.

“Last I knew is that she had married the last surviving mercenary I had traveled with and founded *Lina’s Thread*. I should visit them again, the lifespan of humanoid monsters is always so short.” She continued, ignoring the people around her.

“I am afraid that that company is already over a hundred years old, selling clothes all around the continent by now, majesty...” the man behind her said, unsure what to think of that.

“Oh...” Olivias smile faded. She looked down, not saying anything after that.

“She has lost her memory. Please bear with her.” I said silently, but they only gave me another push as an answer, letting me fall on the stairs for a moment before they pulled me back on the feet.

We continued the way up for a long time. My left leg started hurting more, but the men showed no mercy, pushing me even harder. Eventually we entered a big lobby, the banner of Krahenfels painted on the ground, the furniture looking really expensive. The men ignored it, bringing us to an elevator that was big enough to fit all of us, pressing the button for the fourth floor.

*Whoa, I already had seen that they had modern buildings, but also elevators? Well, I will take it. Better than running up the stairs. Or being bullied on them by those men.*

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The elevator came to a halt, its doors opening.

Behind it was utter chaos, paper scattered on the floor, other men in black standing already here, watching the table at the end of the room.

Everyone was focused on Gav and Alis, holding a man on a chair before them, a crossbow pointed on his head.

“Mister Westground!” the men around us shouted, hurrying us out of the elevator. Those two terrorists were staring at us, Gav having a really scary look on his face.

“Oh, you got caught?” He shook his head. “Wait, no surprise there, that was bound to happen. But that you are still alive? *That* is the thing I can’t believe.” he said sarcastically, giving me a grin.

“Are you really in a position to talk? I mean, what will you do next, now that you have taken me hostage?” Theodore asked, his voice completely calm. In fact, he was just sitting relaxed on his chair, a glass with red liquid in his hand.

“You need to ask? I am going to take down this stupid system! I will even destroy the country if that is what it takes!” Gav shouted, pressing the crossbow on Theodore’s temple, the tip of the bolt penetrating his skin, a drop of blood running down.

“Then what are you doing here, holding a gun to my face? You think this will change anything? Go ahead then, pull the trigger.” He provoked Gav, taking a sip from his glass.

Gav clenched his finger around the trigger, his face distorting in anger. A few seconds passed, then another ten.

“As I thought. You are not stupid, but young and inexperienced. You know well enough that if I die Olivia will take over. And that she has the exact same goals I do, the only difference between us that no one can kill her.” He started laughing, but Gav just hit Theodore’s forehead with the crossbow.

“Always so brutal. Just like the robbing of the bank. Tsk tsk tsk.” He waved his finger, seeming amused. “You really did a good job there, I got to admit it. Never thought someone could break into that vault, but you just got below it, broke the ceiling above you with dynamite and loaded everything on a truck parked under it. And even stole some state treasures! Impressive, really. But those state treasures, I would *love* to get them back. Consider the gold you threw away as payment for showing us those flaws in our systems.” Gav only clicked his tongue.

“How did you find our hideout? How did you flush out every agent we had?” Gav asked, his voice cold as ice.

“Oh, *that*, yeah. I have my own agents. The black market is operating under my watch, collecting information on anyone that could get dangerous. I wanted to use them to flush out all those pesky assassins that had been going rogue, but your white haired friend just came along and helped us, killing the master and letting his most trusted men run straight into my hands.” He pointed at me.

“You were a wild card, and after I saw how Olivia dragged you along I added her into my plans. But to think you would kill even your uncle like that, just *wow*. Thanks to that we have essentially destroyed the complete profession on the continent. No one knows of his death yet and now that we found the middleman we can just let the people run into our traps set by imitating him one after another, dismantling them without even hunting them. And if we play our hands right it will take quite a while until they notice it. Such a shame for the lost tool, but I guess spring cleaning is necessary now and then.” He laughed again.

“You did not answer my question! How did you find us out? Some low agents from the black market are not nearly enough!” Alis shouted at him, annoyance on her pale face.

“Sure, I can tell you something about that. You got too many friends in high places. I am not sure how much Olivia has told Shara, so maybe she knows what I mean with that, but please do not tell anyone, yes?” He winked at me.

*Wait, did he mean the slave collars on everyone with important duties that Olivia had told me about? Was someone Gav trusted wearing a collar and forced to report?* “But Gav, Alis. You two have my respects. I never noticed your dangerous activities until you robbed the bank. And when I had them investigate the culprits, not arresting them directly had proved to be the best decision possible. I thought it had only been a single bad spot, but no, the whole foundation had been infected. So many contacts to the outside, so many places, and to use the prostitutes in such a way... there is still a lot I have to clean up behind the two of you. But before I get to that, maybe tell me at first what exactly had motivated to move against the guild?”

Gav had gone pale from all the things Theodore already knew about. But he did not let the shock get to him, forcing himself to continue glaring at him.

“What motivated me? Maybe that stupid system with the guild that forced my sister into prostitution! Or the fact that you just yesterday started pushing a new law that will take away the line of work she has been forced into in the first place, banning prostitution and forcing millions of people on the whole continent to lose their jobs! How could I not move against that? How could other people not be angry at that, trying to destroy this stupid thing?!” Gav shouted, once again hitting Theodore with the crossbow. But he only shrugged it off, ignoring the blood flowing down his face.

“Of course that seems bad when you are on the receiving end.” He said, nodding his head. “But you see, I am the person responsible for the whole world. And with the responsibility I hold for the people I have to take another viewpoint. The viewpoint of the greater good.”

He stood up, ignoring Gav and Alis, going to the window. Those two had just lost their hostage, yet no one moved against them.

“To be honest, I am just as disgusted from this system. But I do have to make choices, and I already *made* my choice.” He took a breath and turned around, facing Alis and Gav. “I already have been trying to promote another system after my father had laid down the groundwork. We are trying to change it to an school that the children first have to visit before doing *any* job, abolishing the whole apprenticeship system. But you know why it fails?” Theodore started laughing like a maniac, turning to the window again.

“The people never even think that anything *should* be changed with the current system. *It had always worked this way, it will always work that way and changing it is wrong from the start because nothing is wrong with it.* And in other states who only had that system for a hundred years? *We like it, it is easy and it guarantees our*

*children get to learn something without our family having to pay for their education, also earning our families more money so we have less mouth to feed."*

Theodore chuckled. "You see, it is not because *we* want it to be this way, but rather it is because of those that do not *want* to let it go. *They* want to be it this way, not even sparring a thought at their future if they get old or ill. Yet orphans older than ten years are coming again and again to the orphanages, most of them forced into the same profession you both ended in. But not many get as lucky as you do. It's screwed up, you are completely right."

Gav shook his head. "This is crazy! You have the power to change it anyway, don't you? You could use other ways to stop something like this from happening!" He shouted at Theodore, trying to jump at him. Alis grabbed his arm, holding him back. "Gav... I think he is not really wrong. Or the one at fault here."

"Alis..." Gav replied, now finally looking at her and reaching out for her, so she would not fall down. She was shaking and unsteady on her legs.

*Did Gav not use the healing stone? Or was it not that effective?*

"She is right, boy. I have the life of everyone in the world on my shoulders. My decisions can very much cause a war even greater than the world war had already been. The people in the other districts are not as nice as here. Movements against humanoids, petty crimes and growing drug consumption are just some of the problems we have to deal with. And in other states most of the districts where it happens are the red light districts, forcing our hands in that matter, even if you two are keeping the one in Krahenfels very safe. Thank you for that, by the way, I mean it. And I would like it if you would continue it like that, but this time without that *anti government* thing."

"And what about censoring books? Huh?" Gav asked, growling. He was losing, and he knew it.

"Some ideas are too radical. We want to remove them before they take hold. Things like hate books blaming humanoids for everything, riling the people up against them, saying the world should be cleaned of them. That has been a problem both in the north and the west already and many people died because of that in the past. This law is even too late I dare to say."

Gav did not even say anything anymore. He was just standing there, looking hateful at everyone around him, gritting his teeth, trying to find something to direct his anger too. "Gav... we lost." Alis said, putting her arm on his shoulder before she slumped down into his arms, her face completely drained of color.

Theodore turned around and wanted to return to his seat, but Gav pointed his crossbow at him, screaming "Do not come any closer to her!"



Theodore stopped, mustering him. "I am not your enemy. I only need those state treasures you stole and you can take her to the next hospital. There will be no charges and no one will ever approach you about this incident."

"...Come again?" Gav asked, his voice shaking. "Why... would you do that? That does not make sense! You are clearly setting a trap here!"

Theodore smiled. "No matter how you see it, I already won. Your agents are gone in most places, being transferred to other working places, their names and faces known. And even if I let you go, nothing will change. Either you will stop your little resistance and it will slowly fade, or you will resume contact with them, showing me where every last one of them is. I just want the treasures back. That jaw is dangerous and is best to be locked away. And those stones are quite valuable if something would ever happen. Not that big of a big price considering the crimes you committed."

Gav gritted his teeth, staring at him, not saying anything.

"Gav... I think Alis is more important now." I spoke up, looking pleadingly at him. Alis did not seem like she was even following the conversation anymore. Gav at first ignored me before he shot me a hateful glare. "Shut up! I know that already!" he hissed at me before turning back to Theodore.

"The first stone I used on that pathetic moron you captured. The second one to save my sister. And the jaw... Shima had it last." He took a small bag out of his pocket, throwing it at Theodore who caught it. Alis passed out a moment later, leaning against Gav's shoulder.

"Let the siblings go." He said to his men after checking the content, pointing on Gav and Alis.

Just before they left Theodore spoke up again. "It's not like I want to push a whole guild branch out of work again. A few might suffer soon, yes. But with the speed we are developing and expanding our technology, most of you will be needed in new guilds soon. And... even with the guild working they way it is now, the prostitution guild shows that the age for entrance has not to be ten years old. If people with that experience were to fill and control those new guilds... maybe the future will be a better one. Carved by those that understand the flaws in the system and change it from within, rather than with force from without. And that is why I believe what I am doing is right."

Gav clicked his tongue and took Alis on his arms, carrying her past us. He stopped for a moment after he passed me. "Good luck, moron. Alis will miss you. But you are done for, sorry."

I did not say anything and avoided his gaze. He was right, and I knew it.

"Please tell that woman I am sorry for hurting her. I did not want to." Olivia spoke up

to my surprise. But Gav did not answer, he just started walking again, entering the elevator. *O-Olivia?!*

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Theodore turned to Olivia and me now.

"I have left the claw in the mausoleum. It should still be there, and it probably is still open right now. Please put it into a safe space again." Olivia said indifferently.

"You got your memories back..." I muttered, but Olivia ignored me.

Theodore nodded, his eyes now on me.

"So, why did you spend time with her, Olivia? I know you get the weirdest ideas sometimes, but staying with her even after you knew what she had done... that is something I did not expect. It did help us, though, so I am not complaining."

Olivia nodded. "Neither did I expect that. But I believe in her, and I will protect her till the end. And also she removed those nasty collars from me."

"Oh, she did? So you say our contract is now over?" He asked, his brows furrowed.

"No, I just thought with declaring me a hostage you told me to do what I want, so I wanted to change *that* part of the contract. You should know already that neither you nor your father ever needed to use them for me to cooperate in the first place. And you know you can at least trust me *that* much." Olivia answered him, lowering her head. Theodore nodded. "True. I still cant be sure about those others officials who change every five years in their positions, but with you..." he sighed, but then pointed at me.

"I do not know what exactly your deal with Olivia is, but I fear that with your capture today I have no choice but to arrest you. After your past has been leaked there is only the death sentence for you left. We cannot pretend the things you did never happened, unlike with those two I just let go." He sounded indifferent, but I could only nod. Not that I wanted to hear it, but I knew already it would happen the moment they had caught us. Even Olivia could not save me from that. "About that I have-" "Hey, stop!" Olivia started to say something, but her sentence was interrupted by a shout behind us after I heard the elevator opening again.

"Oh, I will gladly do the execution part." Another voice came from behind me, the elevator doors now closing again. I turned around, only to see Janine standing there with a smile, firing her crossbow at me without any hesitation and ignoring the men that tried to stop her.

The bolt hit me in the right flank, letting me groan from intense pain.

"No!" Olivia screamed, catching me with her arms when I fell down.

"I did not think you would come up here. Or take that long for your revenge." Theodore chuckled. "What, am I late to the party?" Janine asked, waving her crossbow. "But I am sorry to say that she is mine. So please let me deal with her."

Theodore shook his head. "Sorry, but she is to be judged by the judges and executed by the knights. You are too late now<."

"Ugh, just like I thought this would end." The woman put out her tongue, pulling a pin behind her back, causing multiple canisters falling down. Within a second the room was filled with thick smoke.

"Get hold of her!" Theodore shouted while the white smoke crept up through the room, burning in my eyes and my lungs, people around me started to move, screams coming from somewhere.

I didn't try to move, my left thigh had been hurting and bleeding for a while now, the new hole in my arm still was burning and now there was a new stabbing pain in my lower torso, blood flowing from it. Normally that should let me panic, but somehow I just calmly accepted it. *I will die from these wounds, right? And even if not, I will be executed anyway. So why should I even care now?*

But Olivia seemed to see things differently, starting to drag me away as fast as she could. *Is that promise really worth that much to her?*

*Seeing how much she was fighting for me to survive and remembering how she had called me an idiot for accepting my death last time, how could I just give up again?*

Gathering my strength again I tried to get back on my legs. "I will protect you!" she told me with a firm voice, doubling her efforts while dragging me behind her.

I nearly got back up, trying clumsily to keep Olivia's pace, who was looking for an exit in the smoke.

All of a sudden Janine appeared before me, screaming: "Oh, you don't!", ramming a knife in my right chest before a hand appeared around her neck, pulling her away while she continued screaming.

I winced from the pain, breathing suddenly had become painful and something warm entered my mouth the moment I exhaled.

Olivia did not seem to have noticed it and continued to pull me away through the smoke, reaching a door to an staircase leading up and shutting it behind me.

I fell down on my knees, trying to support my fall with my arms, but they still were bound behind my back.

Olivia pulled at my sleeve, wanting to get me going when she saw the knife sticking in my chest. "Shima... no..." she went pale, unsure what to say.

She put her hand under my arm, pulling me on my legs and supporting me with her shoulders again.

"Where is she?" A voice screamed behind the door, its fury sending down a shiver my spine.

Olivia started to climb the stairs with me, trying to put most of my weight on her shoulders so I could move with her.

“Olivia...” I said with a smile, looking at her.

“That is not the time to talk!” She hissed at me, annoyed at the slow pace we were going. The bolt in my side was still sticking out, but it did not seem to bleed that much anymore. The bloody stains on my thigh also seemed to have dried while we were talking, turning into a dark black spot.

Finally having enough of my slow pace Olivia simply grabbed me, taking me on her arms, carrying me like a princess.

“Olivia... do you remember what happened when your memories were gone?” I asked her, every breath sending pain through my chest while I felt like I was suffocating despite the air entering my lungs.

“Yes, I do. And I remember that little *love* story of yours, how much you despaired over why I am still helping you, and worst of all, these embarrassing things I told you from when I was young. Both Shaha and Julius had already scolded me for forcing myself on him that young. And I did *not* want anyone else to see my stupid past self!” I tried to laugh, but it only became a strained smile. “Don’t worry, I won’t be able to... scold ...you.” I assured her.

The knife in my chest had penetrated my lungs, the blood flooding them now was slowly suffocating me. And considering how much blood I already lost from the wound in my left thigh last week and the amount of blood that I lost today alone I was pretty sure nothing could save me now.

*I was as good as dead. It’s almost over. And the only thing I achieved by coming to this world has been to... fall in love with a girl and getting rejected. How pathetic.*

“I also... wanted to tell you... something while... I can.” I continued, Olivia still carrying me upstairs, trying to open every door in the way, only to find them locked.

*One way doors. Only for emergencies. How ironic, stopping us in exactly that situation.*

“Can you keep that for later? I am trying to save you right now!” She shouted frustrated. *She knew. She knew that she would not make it, but she still tried to.*

“Just.. listen. It’s about... Ade. Only... that it might not be related... at all.” I ignored her protest and continued, She stayed silent, still trying to open every door on the way up, only for none of them to open.

“The workplace... I had found. It had something... called project A.D.E.” I continued after a short while. “Maybe it’s a coincidence that it has the... same name. But maybe not. And I still... don’t know what... it was about.”

A door below us could be heard, followed by a pair of steps following us. Olivia cursed silently, but she continued carrying me upwards and trying every door.

“I only could... read one research paper... I found. They were... scanning the brain...

from brain dead children.”

We were reaching the next floor. Big black numbers told us that it was the 30th floor. “And they... scanned one of the children... and noticed its brain was still functioning.”

31th floor now, and the steps were coming closer. Olivia looked concerned, but she still continued, trying to be faster without dropping me.

“But they... chose to ignore it. Not tell the family. So the machines keeping her... alive were plugged... from her parents.” 32th floor now.

The door still did not open. And surely the the next ones would not open, either. Still Olivia tried them, not wanting to give me up. *Such a stubborn girl.*

“I... read it. And I tried to... stop them. Went to a lawyer. But turns out...” I coughed, something warm came up, breathing got even harder.

“But it turns out... they were a government... research station. They paid... me money... to forget about it. And... I had to... take it. And... I hated... myself... for it. And later... I learned from... my friend... that the girl... had cancer... the second time... and it spread all... through her body. She would... have died anyway. They were doing... her a favor.” 33th floor now, the steps still could be heard. Olivia gave up trying the doors, now just carrying me upwards.

“And I... shut myself in... ashamed of myself... pitying myself...” 34th floor. “Because... my ex left me... I had... no will to live left. And shut... myself in because of... those two things. And after... I finally had... run out of money... nowhere to go... death had been... the next thing... I could run away... to.”

35th floor. The stairs ended here, only a single door was left. Olivia stopped shortly, not sure if she wanted to try it.

“And now... death comes... for me... in another world. Funny, isn’t it?” I joked, a bitter smile on my head.

But Olivia did not look at me, instead she tried to open the door, and much to our both surprise, it opened, leading to the roof of the building.

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We had arrived on the roof, the door closing behind us, leaving us no other way to run to. It looked similar to the very one where I wanted to jump to death, even the snow was here.

“Olivia...” I muttered, my voice shaking. Breathing hurt so much that I could only focus on the pain, the air I breathed out carrying the smell of blood. I could feel a thin line of a warm liquid running down the side of my lip.

“Yes, Shima?” She asked me, putting me on the ground and taking my hand. I was thankful for it and squeezed it. My eyes started to lose their focus while the

world lost its colour, almost like I was going blind again. I still felt the glasses on my nose, so it had to be my eyes.

“Thank... you.” I muttered, trying to look at her. “For... believing in... me. And after all... I want you to know... I love... you. Even... if saying that... now... is not... fair.” I muttered, closing my eyes. Staying conscious was tiring and the very act of breathing felt like I was stabbing myself.

“Shima...” She put a hand on my cheek. “I could not help you survive. I screwed it up. Sorry...” Olivia muttered with a pained voice, something wet dripping on my cheek.

*I was happy to have met you. The time I spent was short, but I had fun being around you. Talking with you. Listening to you. Learning more about you.*

*There always had only been one way for this to end.*

*This was how it was supposed to go.*

“Goodbye.”

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I still hold her hand after I put her on the ground, tears dropping from my eyes. She had told me that this would be the only way, but I still could not accept it.

“After everything I told you... to still leave me behind like this... just like everyone else does...”

With shaking hands I touched Shima’s cheeks, they still felt warm. She already had stopped breathing, the heat slowly disappearing from her body. The hand I hold was lifeless, reminding me of the many people of my family I had already accompanied on their deathbed, starting with my own parents. But no matter how often it happened, I still cried every time, still felt so lonely after they left.

It never got easier and I never could lose the same person twice. Each time was something different, each person I cried after had impacted my life in different ways. *How could I grew numb to that? How could I call myself still human if I would let those precious feelings go?*

And so I cried, putting my head on her chest, unable to process the feeling of having survived so far, having fought so hard, only to fail shortly before I could find a way to negotiate with Theodore.

Behind me I could hear a door being kicked open, a woman screaming in rage. “Where is she?!” Her voice was cracking from shouting so much, but she still continued, coming closer, extending her hand to Shima’s corpse.

“Don’t touch her!” I shouted, putting myself between us. I noticed that the woman had many bleeding wounds, but I chose to ignore her after what she had done.

“Oh... she already died. A shame. I wanted to make it personally, you know? ...Why you crying over her anyway?”

The temper of that woman had cooled down in an instant, realizing the state of Shima's body.

“Aw damn, guess my revenge is over now...” she muttered, sounding exhausted, falling to the ground not far from me. “Thought it would be more fulfilling. But now I have nothing left. It feels kind of empty. Weird.” She laughed out loud.

“I finally did it... mommy did revenge you, sweetie. And I will join you soon, honey... sorry that you had to wait...” the woman whispered, sounding strangely happy. A moment later I could hear her standing up and walking toward the edge, but I did not turn around, did not want to see the one that had killed Shima. Did not want to think about what I might have done if I saw her again.

Shortly after the woman had disappeared from the edge, other people were coming up, shouting. They surrounded me, but I did not move, refused to even let go of Shima.

Only after someone opposite to me got on his knees, trying to look into my eyes I relented, returning the stare.

Theodore was sitting there, his face as expressionless as ever when he was brooding over a decision. “She got really important for you in such a short time. I would ask you what happened, but I guess this is not the time.”

I shook my head. “No, I think you should know...”

I again started caressing the cheek from Shima, her body having grown cold by now.

“She came from another world. Just like Shaha, and while I did not believe it at the start, she gained my trust. I really believed her in the end, trying to save her with all my might. Trying to protect her from our world labeling her as a killer, judging her for things she had not done. Because it was the person living in that body before her.” I smiled at the end a bit, knowing how crazy it sounded. I believed her until the end. Because I promised her. Because I saw how terrified she had been when trying to kill me. Because she seemed more like a lost kid rather than a heartless killer.

And maybe because I just wanted to be like my husband who had challenged his father to change a law, only to save one Naga from being executed for guilt by blood.

“That does sound crazy. And you believed that?” He chuckled a bit, ripping the knife out of her chest. I recognized it as one of the knives Shima had gotten from the bag this morning. “I never would have thought my little warning of your position being found out would be returned like this.” Theodore said, inspecting the bloody knife.

“So that was you?” I asked him, feeling tired. He always had been like this. Doing things that seemed random, but in the end his actions fell together, forming everything after his very will. His father had been even more skilled, but Theodore's level was also nothing to scoff at.

“From another World...” Theodore muttered silently, playing with the bag in his hand. “When Shaha muttered something carelessly to a scholar we discovered electricity, even though she never meant to tell us about her old world. Now we could have someone who knows a lot more than we do *again*, maybe less careful than Oleg...” he continued, a light smile coming to his face.

“Say, if I would save her, would you take responsibility?” He asked me, still holding up the knife. “If you would have saved her, yes. I would have done anything.” He nodded. “Even accepting the worst punishment for her by your standards? The very thing you hate so much you had been scowling at my father for thirty years?”

I paused a moment. But Theodore spoke further.

“I read what happened in the world war. How the battlefield had looked. What the soldiers had told the historians. And I know why most of the Westground family had been executed. I know the reason the lake near the old Westground villa is called a *dead lake*. I even visited the mansion, seeing the basement with my own eyes. Saw the logs my family had kept, counting how many slaves they used and had to *replace* each week alone.”

He crammed something out from the inside his jacket, reaching me a small bag that had something round and heavy in it.

“But in the end, those collars are just tools. It does not always have to be like the past. You experienced it yourself, did you not? It only takes one friend to unshackle yourself. And I am sure you know why I still have the important heads of the nation wear them.” He smiled at me.

I knew what he wanted. I would have to save Shima the very same way Julius had saved Shaha. Putting a collar on her, making her nothing more than my pet. Robbing her of the ability to disobey what I say. I knew already how much damage that could do. Not only from Nero and his slaves, but also from my childhood, my time with Shaha. How I had ordered her to help me force myself on Julius, who was keeping me away, trying to tell me I had been too young. But I did it anyway, and I had paid the price, my body becoming that of an immortal.

*Would I do better this time? Would I not stoop so low this time? Do not force her to do something she really does not want to do, hurting everyone I care about while thinking it had been for the best?*

With shaking hands I fished the stone out, holding it with both hands. *I probably will do something stupid, I know myself. I know I won't be able to hold myself back. So why? Why was I still doing it? Why would I force her to it, even though I knew better? I only got to know her for a short time. And yet-*

I pressed the stone on Shima's chest, the stone starting to glow. It felt like a mistake, but wanting her to survive, not wanting to let it end like this... that was more important to me. *I am sorry for being so selfish. I am sorry for being so thick headed.*



*I am sorry for forcing you to this, knowing you already had been prepared for that end. Knowing that even if you will be happy to be with me, I might still hurt you in the future.*

The wound on Shima's chest slowly closed itself, the bolt in his right flank fell out. Nothing more happened that I could see, but the stone was still glowing. And it kept glowing longer, and longer. Her chest was starting to move up and down, she started breathing, even if only slowly. Her face was still pale, new clotted blood was coming from her mouth.

"I already called the medical team beforehand, they are coming here soon. And I guess you probably already know where she is going to be confined. The orphanage. In our reach, under our control and no curious people that could spot her." Theodore said, no emotions in his voice. I nodded, holding Shima's hand.

I felt bad about it, about how I had decided for her to go through this. But I felt so happy to be able to spend more time with her.

*To not be left behind once more.*

## Epilogue

*I woke up again.*

I remembered how I was sure I would die, only to have this strange illusion where I talked with Ade and Shaha, but that seems only like a distant dream now.

There was a white ceiling above me and many people with face masks and white coats running around me. One of them took a flashlight, forced my eye to open and shined the bright light directly into it. I wanted to close it since it felt like I would go blind, but he only let me go after a few seconds of tormenting me.

"Can you hear me?" A voice asked me and I nodded.

"...yes..." I muttered, forcing my voice out of my dry throat, the taste of iron coming back into my mouth.

*I survived the crazy woman. Only to get back to the death sentence.*

The next few days I spend isolated in the room. The doctors refused to tell me anything. Or even talk to me at all unless necessary.

At least my body felt good, as if I had never been wounded in the first place. There was no shot wound in my shoulder, no hole in my arm. And my left thigh? It was completely healed, not even a scar.

I continued asking the doctors what happened to me every day, but only after three days they finally opened up, telling me that the magic stone Gav surrendered

to Theodore had healed me. But it had only closed the wounds in my body. It did not replace the blood, nor did it remove the blood in my lungs that had suffocated me. And they told me I would not have survived that day if I had lost any more blood. *Whoa, scary. To think I had almost gone for good.*

After a week I had spend confined in the room Olivia visited me, clearing the room so we would be alone.

She silently sat down next to the bed I was confined in, heavy handcuffs on my arms and legs holding me here and only giving me enough room to move them at least up to the center of my torso.

"I am sorry, Shima." Olivia started, a sad look on her face. I laughed bitterly, trying to show her my smile. "No, you did everything you could. I mean, maybe reviving someone to just carry out the death sentence is a bit much, but I know you did the best you could."

She shook her head. "No. We announced to the public that you had been caught and killed by a survivor that was out for revenge. There will be no judgement."

I tilted my head. "So you say... that I wont be executed? That I will survive?" Olivia gave me a weak nod.

"Then why are you so sad? Is there something you are not telling me?" Olivia hesitated for a moment, then she put her hand into a bag she had brought with her, taking something out of it.

*A slave collar.*

She opened it, holding the ends in my direction. "Huh? Olivia... is that...?" I started to ask, but her face got even sadder when she started explaining.

"Since we cannot say for sure that you really are a person from another world or not there is a chance that you still are Shara. And even if you are not now, no one can say that she would not return one day."

I nodded. *This was probably something Olivia was forced to do to keep me alive.*

"So in order to ensure you will not be able to do anything like the crimes Shara committed we will put the slave collar on you, with me being the master, and give you some orders you have to obey for the rest of your life."

I nodded again, smiling at Olivia, who had teary eyes by now. Without protesting I lifted my head so she could put it on my neck. Olivia hesitated for a moment before she put it on, the lock closing with a loud clack. *It felt... weird. The moment it closed it was like something was in my mind, forcing me to feel a certain way. When I looked at Olivia, my mood was boosted, filled by a foreign desire to make her happy and obey her, yet the moment I thought anything less positive about her it was drilling sadness and defiance into me.*

“I am your master, no one else but me can give you orders that are enforced by the collar. You are never to kill anyone again, neither personally nor by happenstance with your doing to lead to that outcome. And you will never let anyone take the collar off.” Olivia looked angry and sad at the same time, each order harder for her than the last one to say. After she finished I still smiled at her.

“Further from that you will be confined to the orphanage. You will live there for the rest of your life and help with the duties there. You can only leave if either Theodore, Thesa or I accompany you. This is to protect you from being discovered, since many people could be still out for your blood if they knew you survived.”

*Whoa, that is the worst one. I do not mind wearing that collar if Olivia is the master. But putting me in the orphanage was the worst thing they could do. And now I was ordered to live there, together with that old woman Thesa that told me I would be guilty even if I did not commit those crimes.*

“I am sorry... for forcing this at you...” Olivia muttered, tears running down her face. “I wanted you to survive. I did not want to lose someone yet again. So I decided to save you, even though I knew that I would have to do this to you.”

I wanted to hug her, but I was still tied to the bed by those handcuffs. So I just hold out my hand to her. She looked at it for a moment and then at my still smiling face before she took it. Surprising her I pulled her hand towards me, forcing her closer to me and embracing her.

“Thank you. I mean it. You protected me. And even if you hate the thought of me wearing the collar, I do not mind. I am just glad about everything you have done for me.” I told her, softly petting her hair. But Olivia still continued crying, putting her face on my chest, apologizing to me all the while.

*Yet she never ordered me to tell her the truth.*

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It had been a few weeks since I woke up from the dead. Through the darkened windows of the car I could see how much the city had changed since winter. The inner city had been decorated with flowers and small trees, even some small stalls had popped out here and there, colorful banners were hanging over the streets.

“Are you sure it will be okay with Thesa?” I asked Olivia who was sitting next to me on the passenger seat. Today was the day the doctors finally let me out of the hospital after researching everything they could. It seems like waking up from the dead was not something that happened often in this world and they wanted to get as much information about it as possible.

Olivia said nothing for a moment, only fidgeting her hands.

“Olivia?” I asked her again, getting more nervous.

"It will be fine!" She finally said. "Probably." She added whispering. I wanted to protest about that, but before I could start the car stopped.

"We are here." The driver said and got out, opening the door for both of us.

I went out behind Olivia after I put on the long black hood over my head, making sure my hair was completely covered. We had discussed about coloring my hair, but my predecessor already tried every color possible, so I would just leave it white. It would make no difference if people were to see me, they would recognize me anyway.

The car had parked right before the two big doors of the old keep, the small door leading through the tower being already opened. Mama Thesa was standing inside with a scary face, waiting for us. Olivia noticed my shaking legs and gave me a pat on the back, sending me forward.

"Olivia!" Thesa shouted after the door behind us closed. "You cannot expect me to agree to something like this! This is madness!"

Her voice was furious, but Olivia did not flinch.

"Mama Thesa. Please, if you trust me, trust Shima. I can guarantee you that she is not that person that you think she is." Olivia pleaded, bowing before the old woman.

"Even if she is not, this place is filled with *kids*! And do I need to remind you how many of those were on the list they published? This is crazy!" Thesa was glaring at me like she was looking at an insect. Now even my hands started shaking, but I had nowhere else to go. And what she said... it hammered in one more time that Olivia was the only person in this world that was my ally, even if no one hunted me anymore.

"So why would I let someone like *her* even near them? Why would I even be willingly to let her even *stay* here?!" She shouted at Olivia.

But before she could answer I pulled down the scarf around my neck and showed Thesa the collar. "Is this... enough?" I asked her with a shaking voice.

At the sight Thesa paused, her face grimacing into something between shock and even more anger. It took half a minute before she was able to speak again.

"Is that...? Is that really how far you are willing to go to protect her?"

Olivia nodded, looking down. "So please, Thesa. Let her become *Mama Shima*. She will not be able to kill anyone and I personally vouch for her."

Thesa clicked her tongue, mustering me for quite a while. Then she started to approach me, stopping before me and sliding back the hood from my face. With her fingers she grabbed my chin, forcing me to look into her eyes.

"I do not care if you are Shima or Shara or whatever. Since Olivia is willing to go so far for you I will accept you here as a favor for a good friend. But I swear to *Usamir*, if you ever do something to endanger the kids or ever seem like you are a danger for

this orphanage, I will *personally* kill you. And do not think that I will ever forget that you are responsible for the death of Graun Kroskow!”

There was hatred tripping from her voice and dangerous look in her eyes, telling me that she meant every word she had said.

“Please... take good... care... of me!” I stuttered with a shaking voice.

With that Thesa let me abruptly go and went outside, not caring that I fell backwards on my butt, still shaking.

Olivia took my hand. “You got this!” She patted on my back, smiling at me while I got back on my legs. “I am sure she will warm up to you over time, *Mama Shima*.”

With that she went past me, toward the door we had entered through.

“Wait, you are leaving me alone now?!” I screamed, but Olivia only deviously stretched out her tongue and closed the door from the outside, ignoring my tears.

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“Mama Shima, he is mean to me again!” a kid pulled on my sleeve, begging me to lecture the spider demi human kid behind her that was holding up a big line of thread. “I am not mean to you! I just want to show you the thread I made!”

“Look! I also have white hair like the witch now!” A kid screamed behind me, having put some of my hair I had let grow over his head, making some poses.

“No, don’t touch it! You will also become evil and anger the queen!” some other kid shouted, starting to pull on my hair.

“Ouch!” I screamed, trying to escape them, but those two were standing over the legs I had put behind me, forcing me to slowly free myself with my hand reaching behind my back and trying to move them away. “Please don’t touch me...” I begged, but they did not listen to me.

“Kids, don’t bully Mama Shima like that!” a stern voice said from behind, it was Thesa, the orphanage director.

“But Mama Thesa! We wanted to play the knight saving the queen from the evil witch!” another child behind me protested, also starting to pull on my hair.

*I regret letting it grow longer! The kids always play with it, taking care of it is such a hassle and when I forget to tie them together before going to bed I almost suffocated when they were all over my face!*

“Please, let this *evil witch* stand up. That really hurts!” I pleaded, trying to get the next hand out of my hair, still unable to escape the horde of kids around me.

That *evil witch* was me of course, having earned that nickname thanks to the newspapers showing my face everywhere combined with the fact of my hair being white, something they never had seen before. And that had also revealed that the kind girl visiting them once in a while had been none other than the queen coming to

visit them since autumn last year. And next to the black haired queen with wavy hair was a picture of me, with pale skin, red eyes and white hair.

*No wonder they gave me some mean nickname. One of the reasons I hated being in school was exactly this. But now that I am older and I know they will call me witch to my face and then want to play with me, I just can't really be mad at them. Most of the time, at least.*

At first they had been really shy around me, with a few brave ones taking sticks and saying I should stop being evil and return the queen, trying to threaten me. That stopped after Olivia showed up here, straight up jumping at me and embracing me in a hug. She had been busy since dropping me here, so we had not seen each other for two weeks now.

The kids immediately stopped seeing me as a threat after her visit and started to open up around me, even going so far as to force me to play with them and pulling me away from the work I had to do, no matter how much Thesa protested and lectured them.

It had become full spring by now, the last cold wave just had passed the other week and the sun was shining with no cloud at sight. The kids, not wanting to let good weather like this unused, forced me to play with them outside, even though I had to stay in the shadows near the walls so I would not get a sunburn.

"You still have some time until we need to make lunch. Please take care of them until then." Mama Thesa shouted from the entrance, abandoning me and ignoring the little Naga that was now slithering around me, screaming "I will slay this white haired witch and take Olivias hand!", almost crushing me with that surprisingly strong tail of his.

"Not fair, you said you would marry me!" another kid screamed, pulling on the Nagas tail, causing it to get tighter around my neck.

*I was right, being in this orphanage was hell. But in a different way than I had imagined. Those kids were trying to kill me!*

After staying here for two and a half weeks now I had seen the things everyone had mentioned. This really was a good place for orphans, the Mamas and Papas here tried their best to give those kids a happy childhood and a future. But also how unfair it was. There were a few children over ten years old here, each of them forced to spend all day learning in their rooms. Not because we forced them too, but because they had to learn themselves what the kids with apprenticeships would be taught, unable to rely on anyone but themselves to do so. And while the demi humans that ended up here often had tribes they could go to if they found nothing, humans had to hope for a place to open up, something that happened only through the death of an apprentice, a rare event. And it was sad to see someone like the oldest orphan living here still having found nothing while turning eighteen in autumn.

She still was learning, hoping to be picked, but Thesa told me that she probably would never get picked after getting this old no matter how much she learned, just because she had bad luck being brought here after she turned ten. This system really was cruel. *Seeing that I almost wished Gav and Alis would have succeeded in toppling this system, changing it to something better. And I found myself wishing to help that girl, finding myself trying to meddle into other peoples business again. I never learn, trying to repeat the mistake I did in my last world again, huh?*

“Oh, you are playing with the kids today?” A voice asked me, coming from the opened gates. That task of moving those heavy doors open had of course fallen to me with Thesa saying “Oh, my old bones!” while looking at me with a grin.

*She was the witch here!*

“Olivia!” I shouted happily, turning my face to her while still fighting off the kids grabbing my hair and the little rascal with his long tail going around me.

The kids stopped in the middle of whatever they were doing and ran to her, greeting her, taking her hand and wanting to show her this and that.

Only a small child remained before me with a puppet in her hands, staring at me. “Can I do something for you?” I asked her. She nodded, holding out the puppet to me. “Eh.. should I take that? Is that for me... or?” I asked her, unsure what she wanted. She did not say anything, only stretching it further to me as if to say I just should take it.

Not knowing what else I should do I took it from her hands after which she promptly turned around and ran away. “What was that about...?” I muttered, trying to understand what she wanted.

“She probably either wanted you to take care of your puppet while she does her business or just wanted you to play with it, but was shy about it.” Olivia said, a kid clutching to her on each arm when she got on her knees before me.

“I should play with it?” I took a look at the puppet. It showed much use, the fabric was almost ripped open at some points and a few darker stains were here and there. “The kids really love you. And Mama Thesa will surely come to accept you, too.” She said, smiling while trying to force some of the kids away from her arms, causing them to switch their target and ending up behind me on my legs, pulling my hair again.

*I should have stood up when I had the chance, damn it.*

“If only another person would come to love me, but no, she just put a collar around my neck!” I said sarcastically, puffing my cheeks and trying to tease Olivia.

“I...” Olivia looked away, a sad hint on her face. “You made Livi sad! Meanie!” a kid shouted, pulling my sleeve and glaring at me.

“I am joking of course. It is only thank to you I get to live. And if I have to wear the collar with you being the one controlling it, how could I not be happy?” I told her, moving the puppet before her face as if it had done the talking.

“You really are a meanie!” Olivia responded, also puffing her cheeks, causing me to laugh out until I got interrupted by another pull on my hair.

“Honestly, Olivia. I need to thank you.” I started again, having removed the hand of the culprit. “I still do not understand why you stayed with me, saved me, trusted me this much... but I really am glad about it. And even if I am your pet, that is good enough for me! As long as you are here I will be fine.” I continued now, putting my hand on her head, giving her the biggest smile I got.

“Idiot...” she murmured, her face blushing.

“Part of the reason I got here today is to tell you something about our promise.” She continued, ignoring the kids behind her fighting with wooden swords about who would be allowed to ride her back. Without her consent, of course.

“What is it?” I asked, having to stare at a clover a kid picked and handed to me so it would be happy. *Yes, a nice clover. Thank you, I guess?*

“You know how I promised that I will stay with you until death do us part?” She continued, my breath stopping. I slowly nodded, giving the clover back to the kid and patting its head softly before he ran back, searching for another one.

“Well, you technically did die, so I guess that means the promise is fulfilled...” She continued, even though I would have rather she would not.

“And now you are confined to the orphanage, not allowed to leave it without me. Wearing a collar after I selfishly decided I would take you back, knowing I had to force it on you.” “That-” I started to interject, but she interrupted me.

“I know you think it is okay. But I still feel bad about it. I do not want to hurt you.” One of the kids climbed on her back, holding his sword above him, the one he had the fight with standing next in line. “I am glad you do not hate me for it. But I do, and nothing will change that. I once again made a selfish decision. And I wanted to apologize for that.” She took my hand, the one still holding the puppet. “I will return in a few months or so, maybe. If you are lucky.” She said with a teasing voice and stood up, turning around and walking toward the gate. In that moment the kid from earlier returned. I gave her back the puppet and told her that it made friends with Olivia, having to force my smile after what said person just told me.

*I do not want you to feel bad! I would never hate you! Please, do not look like that just because you saved me! And please...*

*Do not leave me alone.*

“Olivia!” I screamed. She stopped, turned around, having almost reached the gate. “Yes?”

I swallowed. *Without you I wont be able to continue.*

After a short moment I decided to just tell her what I felt. “I will be lonely without you.”



One of the kids hugged my arm then, saying. "Do not worry, Livi, we wont let the evil witch go near you!", clutching all eight legs around it, trying to get Olivias attention.

Olivia said nothing, only looking at me for some time. Slowly scratching her right hand, looking like she was fighting with something in her head. Finally she looked resolved, coming back to me and got on her knees before me, now in the same position again she had been just a minute ago.

"Shima." She said, her voice stern. I nodded, not knowing what to expect.

"Next time you confess to someone, do not do it randomly while you are in a fight, repeating it over and over."

I nodded, my face grimacing from the memory.

"And especially! Don't do so! In the very place where her family is resting and her dead husband is lying only few meters away from her."

"Sorry. I know I am pathetic." I said, bowing my head, causing the kids behind me playing with my hair to laugh for some reason.

"And also..." she went silent for a long time, so I looked up to her again. Only for her soft and cold lips to lock with mine, staying like that for a few seconds.

...*What? What? What?!*

"Wha... Olivia... I ... you..." I stuttered, not knowing what to say.

"Ew, they kissed!" a kid screamed behind me. "Stop trying to give me your spider silk or I will also kiss you!" another kid screamed, followed by screams and laughter. Olivia put her hands before her lips, her cheeks red.

"I still have not found an answer to this chaos in my head. I forced you to wear that collar and brought you back just because I wanted to spend more time with you, even though I still love my dead husband, not sure how I should feel about another relationship, not knowing if doing this is even the right thing to do. But..." She grinned at me, her eyes seeming to glisten, being wet from tears building up in them.

"I want to be selfish again! Force you to be with me, knowing that I am doing something that could hurt you, doing something that I can never take back, trying to have my way with you, not even asking you what you want. I also want you to be happy. So please, *bear with me.*"

"Olivia... I..." I stuttered, still not knowing what I should say, feel, do, think. Forgetting to breath. *Did that really just happen? Did she... just accept me? Did she just kiss me? Am I dreaming?*

"Is this even okay? I mean, I-I am a girl now! Is that even allowed here? A-And... ah..." I stuttered, clutching my head. "Is... it really... okay that you... and me? Okay that you trust me that much? You could still or-" *-der me to tell you the truth if I am from another world or not.* I wanted to say that, but I stopped, knowing how much

pain her other orders had given her already, how much she struggled, how sad she looked when she put the collar on me.

But even then, even after saving me she never questioned if I might have lied to her. Did she trust me that much?

"I mean... why do you even... with me...?" I finally asked her, trying to play over the last question I just had stopped myself from asking.

"Why? Because it is fun being with you. It is fun talking with you, and you always listen when I talk on and on about those things important to me. And you also seem kind of sweet the way you always just seem to need help with everything you do." Her face was getting beet red. "Stop asking me something like that!"

My face was burning, my heart was beating so hard I could hear it in my ears, my hands started to shake, I even forgot to protest the part about me needing to be protected.

"I promise I will come visit you often, Shima." She said, standing up and leaving without turning around, almost like she was running away after having confessed to me. Only a last whisper from her could be heard while she was leaving.

*"I am sorry.."*

But before I could question it she was gone and a voice was shouting for me.

"Mama Shima, come help me make lunch please. I need you to skin and grill the carrots today!" Thesa's voice came behind me from the door to the old throne hall.

With shaking legs I stood up, still trying to comprehend how lucky I was, how my dreams just had come true. How happy I felt, but also the slight hint of regret in my heart. "I am coming!" I screamed back, my shoulders slumping on having to eat or prepare those nasty carrots. *Olivia might trust me, but that old witch Thesa definitely has it out for me, even if she is at least trying to appear friendly by now.*

With that I made my way into the kitchen, hoping Thesa would not scold me as much today.

*But I still feel bad about not being able to tell Olivia about meeting Ade... I thought, thinking back on it again. But then again, did this really happen, or was it just a dream?*

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*What... where am I...?*

I was standing in a room, white tiles on the ground, white painted walls and a ceiling in a small room filled with big packages, a black table standing before me. On the table was a small notebook with a text program opened, the text writing itself.

"It is recording everything (error) I am seeing. Please do not (error) pay it any mind." A voice behind me said that was sounding strangely robotic. I spun around,

confused about all of this. There was a white creature with no facial features, somehow glowing but also not quite real with a physical body, looking at me.

“Wha- What?!” I screamed, crawling away from that creepy thing.

*Is that not Ade? The very last thing before I left the old world?!*

“Affirmative. I am the (error) being you called Ade.” It said, sounding more like a text to speech program, randomly spitting out errors all the time.

“Initiating Memories. (error) Will start program now.” He continued, ignoring me and somehow... stopped standing before me from one moment to the other, like he never had been here.

“Oh, hey, I am back!” A voice behind me shouted. “Ah, but I am just a memory now from the last time I came here... not even my soul is here. That is a good thing, I think. I would hate to be trapped here! Or well, did I even have a soul in the first place? Or had I just been a memory from the start? Ade had never been clear about that...” the voice continued while I was slowly turning around to look at the source.

There was a young demi human, a Naga to be precise. She had a green tale with what seemed an big old wound on the end, and after looking at it for a moment longer I could even see some smaller scars on the scales covering it. Her ears were long like that of an elf, turning green on the end, poking out from the long, black hair that was shining in the light, a few green scales in her face with small red lips and big green eyes with the same kind of vertical iris that Olivia had. And, for some reason, she was wearing the exact same dress that Olivia always wore, only missing the cape. Even the golden embroidery and the frills were the same.

She smiled at me, showing that one of the two fangs on her upper jaw was missing, seeming like it broke of.

“I am Shaha, nice to meet you again!” She said, holding out her hand to me.

I tilted my head, not being able to comprehend what was going on right now.

*I just died, did I not? And now there is... Olivias family here for some reason? Did she not die two hundred years ago?*

“Well, technically I am Shaha, but honestly, this is just the memories of me being simulated into a being so Ade can talk with you. Or rather so I can talk with you. Or do I? Scratch that, that is not important right now.”

She slithered toward me, starred at me for a moment and then continued slithering around me, surrounding me with her tail. Unlike Shozzo the tip of her tail was not moving around, the only emotions showing on her face.

“Hm, hm. You have pretty hair, I am kind of jealous. Though I really am proud of my own hair! I inherited it from my mother!” Her voice was proud and somehow a bit childish, reminding me of the young Olivia when she had lost her memory. She continued to slither around me, practically tying me up while looking at my face upside down from above me. “And you have pretty and unique eyes!” She said with a nod

before she let go of me, slithering to a single big window and looking outside. Not knowing what else to do I followed her, also peeking out.

But there was nothing. A few trees with colorful leaves made it seem like it was autumn were floating in the white nothing, the leaves they lost in what seemed a gust of wind just stopped existing the moment they fell too far.

“You know, I need to apologize. Apologize for Ade, I mean. And I guess also for Olivia, but I am glad she is still doing well...” She put her fist to her chest, holding it with the other hand, looking down.

“The very fact that Ade took your soul in the first place was just a whim. He heard your wish and he wanted to grant it, being a god. But he did not know at the time how to, so he just left you there, next to the soul of mine. The soul that I have been when I was alive, not what is standing and talking with you here. Well, if it really had been a soul at that. I had already existed in him when he was born, you know?” She laughed bitterly.

“What happened to my old body?” I asked her, my voice sounding sad.

“It got its soul and memory removed, so it just died.” she informed me, not even sounding like that was a big thing. And well, I really did not care about the past world anymore. Or about anything now after dying.

“He returned me first, noticing how I screamed to live, even though I had not realized it myself. So he put me in an egg, placing my soul into a new child that had developed no soul of its own yet. When I grew older, despairing over the weird place I had been placed in, living in a tribe with snakes I could not speak with, following traditions I did not understand, being cast out from the rest since I just had been so different... it was then when Ade appeared, guiding me, being the very reason I stayed sane after I gave up on life in my old world and not fitting in with the tribe.”

So Shaha really had been from another world, just like me. And just like me she had been struggling.

“But Ade never appeared before me. Never guided me. Only appearing the moment I died. And now I hear that he only took me on a whim? Please at least tell me that there is a reason for me being here!” I shouted, anger rising up in me.

*Was all of that just a game for him?*

Shaha paused a moment. “I am sorry.”

“Sorry about what? About him taking me on a whim? Or about him deciding I had not been worth it and just dump me, not even bothering to tell me anything or talk with the girl desperately searching for him?” I shouted in anger.

Shaha turned away from the window, now facing me.

“Sorry about putting you in a body that would make you so many problems. The old soul had already left the body, so he just put you in instead, deleting her memories.”

I started laughing, not even getting mad from that revelation. "So Ade just took me after I muttered a wish, dumped me in a random body taking the life away from someone else and just *abandoned me in a fantasy world*? With this *fantasy world* being the biggest piece of crap with it becoming just like my own world? Could he have not done so at least a bit earlier? You know, the time when there had been magic and monsters and sword fights?"

Shaha shook her head. "He could have, probably. But after my story *had been told*... he did not want to repeat it, did not want to let anyone else suffer the way I did."

I clapped. "Wow, that part went *great*. And now he does not even talk to me himself. He must be *really* proud of this." My voice was dripping with irony, but Shaha ignored it. "He also does not know why he did it." She went back from the window to the table, but I did not follow her this time.

"Something had happened when he was telling the story of Olivia. He had been with her for over ten years at that point, having promised her to help her find a way to finally let her die. That was when the world war started, both continents being split into fractions, one of them trying to enforce slavery becoming part of society, the other one trying to stop it. And after it concluded and the plague was starting, Ade had suddenly changed. A part of his had disappeared after he went to visit someone."

She looked at the screen from the notebook that still had text scrolling down on it. "Someone or something had trapped him and sealed away an important part of Ade. He is no longer able to talk with anyone or even make decisions most of the time. That was why he never showed himself to you. And the reason he broke the promise with Olivia." She concluded, sitting down on one of the packages next to her.

"In that case, why do you talk to me now?" I asked her, sitting down beside her. "And what did happen with the old soul from this body?"

Shara leaned back against the wall, putting her arms behind her head. "The former soul of your body was gone already, even the healing stone would not have saved her. Ade deleted her memories and only left her basic memories of language and writing in your head, something I did not have with my new body. He might have made some mistakes while doing so, but you are the only soul inside that body, that we can guarantee." *The way I had called that man old fart proved that he made at least one mistake.*

"And why we talk to you? Because soon you will be alive again and with your soul outside the body its the only time Ade can interact with you right now. Olivia will use the last healing stone on you, the last one remaining on this world. Ade wanted to apologize to you about how it ended, but he is not good at talking right now, so I fill in that part for now. And he summoned me to speak with you because I know Olivia." She took my hand, looking me in the eyes, her eyes unwavering. "Please take care

of her. She is a fragile girl, even if she cannot die. She gets easily lonely, doubts herself all the time and just wants someone she can talk with, someone who will be by her side, all the time scared of hurting the people close to her. She is quite something, but I promise that she always means well.”

I nodded, a smile on my face. *She is still trying her best for me. Thank you, Olivia.* “I can’t promise anything, but I will try my best since I did fall in love with her.” I answered honestly.

Shaha continued to stare into my eyes. “And also, please do not tell her about Ade and me. It would break her heart if she would know she could continue to talk to a version of me, even if it would not be the real one. And Ade cannot help her until someone will find him.”

*I hesitated for a moment. I knew already how desperate Olivia had been to help me just because I might know something about Ade, yet I should stay silent. I understood why it would be better, but I would still have to lie to her.*

With a heavy heart I nodded. “I will feel bad about it, but if the great hero of Krahenfels is asking me, what choice do I have? Not that you start going berserk and undress.” I joked at her, only earning myself the honor of her tail wrapping around me and squeezing me until I apologized.

“Honestly, my armor had just gotten in the way on the battlefield, so I had to discard it! But after that point everyone just *had* to picture me this way! I hated it so much I nearly tore down both the picture and the statues with my own hands, only for Groh and Harro to hold me back in the last moment! Grrr...”

She looked a bit sour for a moment before she returned to normal. I laughed a little at that.

“But I still have a lot of questions. Is there really no reasons for me to be in this world? Is my existence there really useless?” I asked her, hoping she would at least tell me something.

“Sorry...” she muttered, her tail hanging low now. “But if it makes you feel better, my being there was also just a whim from him. I also had to fight tooth and tail for a place to call home. What you do with your life is your own decision. You might not belong in this world, but you still can make yourself a home here. You don’t need that obnoxious wannabe god for that.”

She came closer, giving me a hug. Strangely I just accepted it like I had with Olivia, not resisting it in any way. She felt familiar somehow, as if we had known each other for centuries.

“It’s time for you to return. The stone is still trying to revive you, but your soul won’t come back as long as you are here, draining its power until there is none left.” She stood up, but I still had a question for her. “May I really not tell Olivia? I... do not want to lie to her. Not after she put so much trust in me.” I asked hesitatingly.

But Shaha only slithered to me, putting a hand on my shoulder. “That might be true, but it would hurt her more to know it. And if she ever complains about it, just tell her Shaha told you to. At that point it would be too late anyway to try and hide it. Just do not let that happen in the first place.” She smiled, but I still felt mixed about it.

*Why tell me all of this in the first place, then? It is not really like there had been a reason to do so. Or did that god really just feel actual remorse?*

My body started to feel light, stretching in weird ways, the sight of the demi human before me growing dim before it disappeared, leaving me only in a void, my consciousness fading. “Please find a way to free the rest of Ade, if you can.” Shaha’s voice said, fading into the background before everything went white and then black.

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Theodore Westground was sitting in his flat at the top of the guild tower, seated in the office next to his living space. Next to him was a glass of red grape juice, the replacement for the wine he had liked to sip. His own policies also affected him, but he was fine with it.

He slowly turned the pages of the reports he had received, his brow wrinkling sometimes, a smile appearing on his face on others. The world was moving no matter what, the technology they had evolved day by day, enabling them to do things in ways they could never had been done before. The last big change was the usage of power lines hanging over train tracks as way to also transport data, slowly connecting district by district, making it possible to directly communicate with them in real time. That was incredibly useful to react to changes fast, removing the need of letters and order to be transported by trains and cars. *And incredibly dangerous if it enabled the people in this world to connect with each other, talking together and sharing ideas. Information are a powerful weapon, especially in the wrong hands.*

He turned to the next page, opening a report about the boy Gav and his half sister, Alis.

After that day they had visited a hospital, just like he thought they would. But somehow they escaped his agents completely after that. He was not mad about it in the slightest- he did promise them freedom for that stone and the jaw and he intended to keep his word. But that information meant they had found another hole in his network and yet more work for him. And, in the worst case, it might mean they will attack again. If they would resort to such methods as that winter he could easily shake them off, even if that missing gold had turned out to be a greater bother than he had anticipated. But that was if they would *not* learn from the experience.

Those two were intelligent. If they would ever attack again, it would be more than this childish plan and throwing a tantrum in his office.

He sighed and stood up, going to the window once more, looking at the city to his feet, illuminated by the moon in the sky.

His father always told him how information could win any war before it was fought, but now that he was gone the problems in the United Nations were just accumulating faster than he could fix them. The technology was developing so fast he could not catch up to it, the resources needed for some of them were rare and difficult to get and the disassembled winner guild in Rhynepact was threatening to revolt against the ban of alcohol, gathering quite a few radical followers behind them.

Pulling the queen out of her state as a mysterious puppet after all this time was something he had to do sooner or later anyway. Only that the unexpected reach of that leak about Shima forced his hand to do it now.

But that was not a problem, he needed every help he could get. If he would not get the situation under control soon, with force if necessary, the whole world would be struck in a war even worse than the last one.

And there was also the pact with Olivia. If he could not guarantee world peace she might turn against him, destroying the safe place his father had created for them.

And he knew how important the goal was for Olivia. Even if he had spend his childhood growing up at her side, if she were to choose between him and her goal, he knew the answer.

Then there was the thing with the assassins. He only wanted to get rid of the rogues, but now he had to completely dismantle them.

With a long sigh he sat himself again behind his desk, working further through the statistics and reports given to him. *I might be the king of the world, but that only means burdening my shoulders with decisions I never wanted to make.*

*I just hope that I can overcome the coming crises.*