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Spring 2022

Seven Themes

# Spring 2022: Seven Themes

*by* Various

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# Anon Goes to Japan

by /a/non

## Week Zero

### Preface

*I've decided to write about my "first times" in Japan. I wrote a diary as I went along that I'd been meaning to turn into a proper account for a long time now. This won't exactly be it, it's more like the "edited highlights", but it's a good first stepping stone. I think I'd better do it before all those little nuances I didn't scribble down are lost to time, not so much like tears in rain, but probably more like an individual cicada in a forest.*

*I'm expecting to get told "Oh, you should have gone to [place], or did [thing]" a few times. Pre-emptively: I may have some time after this. I came back from this trip with a few missed targets and the odd regret (the biggest of which was not getting out into the countryside more – I fixed that on my second trip big-time). However – just like you, I'm sure – I'm looking forward to being back over there and everybody's to-do-in-Japan list could always use more entries, right? Suggest away. If I don't use it, I'm sure someone else will.*

*I've made a few very minor changes where things might end up identifying me (for clarity: No, you don't already "know" me. I just really want it to stay that way.) I've also cut a few chunks where nothing particularly interesting happened, so if Anon cares he can consider this account "mostly true". In particular, I spent a lot of time getting slightly lost. Word to the wise: japan-guide.com and other, similar websites are very good at getting you in the ballpark, I generally recommend them, but unless you're very careful which exit you take at the train station, those last few steps before*

*you know where you're going can often feel a little bit like "now draw the rest of the owl". I've pulled out a lot of that aimless wandering, unless it's relevant. I also think I may have mixed up a few days here and there. Some of the timestamps from my photo archive don't match the order some of my comments are written down in my diary, and certain things I took multiple passes at. I've tried to condense each "thing" into one coherent event, so none of my sources ends up being chronologically definitive. To compound issues, parts of the original diary are organised geographically and updates happened in chunks as I found a little time on train journeys, rainy days, etc. Between that and my memory, I've done the best I think I can reasonably do to make something that's as true to history as possible while still being entertaining.*

*We pick up the story in early September, somewhere in the 2010s...*

## **Thursday**

From my hotel room, I have a great view of the airport. While I have never been the world's biggest aviation geek, I do like to watch the planes. I am proud to say that I love my airport just as much as my station. The setting sun has washed the sky in those hyper-real shades of blue, purple and orange. Here and there, small clouds piled up like boulders, catch the last of the day's light.

The triple-glazed windows prevent most of the drone of the jet engines from reaching me, but sat right by the window I can still hear the spool-up of the larger birds down this end of the nearest runway. It's a busy evening, and short of actually staying in the airport hotel itself, this is one of the best seats in the house.

I rummage absent-mindedly through my things one more time. Passport...boarding passes...insurance...directions...meds...insect repellent...sunblock...cash...PASMO...phone...charging cable...toiletries...clothes...All present and correct, just as it was an hour ago, and the hour before that, and the one before that.

I draw the curtains as the sun dips below the horizon, and glance at my phone. Just before eight PM. Twelve hours to check-

in opening, fifteen hours to the flight. I push my complimentary slippers back on, grab my toiletries bag and pad gently over to the bathroom. Opening up my toiletries bag, I mentally cycle through everything in there as I extract a disposable razor and the tiniest travel cans of shaving foam and deodorant I've ever seen. These, along with a disposable toothbrush, are the leftover toiletries saved from a previous holiday. There's just enough here to get me to Friday morning. Everything else is fresh and sealed, ready to go into the cargo hold so that I don't have to concern myself too much with airport security and their arbitrary bullshit.

I've always found it easier to shave in the evening if you've got a busy day ahead. You're more relaxed, there's no rush to be anywhere, and so afterwards you can just wind down quietly for a few hours until it's time to sleep. Plus I won't look like I just desperately dragged a sharpened spoon over my face when I'm in front of airport security. Everything planned for maximum calm and comfy, nothing is rushed, plenty of time and space to adjust if something isn't quite right.

With an appearance that is slightly more human than before, I take some time to lie on the end of the bed and poke about online. As usual, there's not really anything *worth* looking at, but I'll look at it anyway. Eventually, tiredness gets the better of me. I set the alarm on my phone to 6AM and plug in the charger. *Oyasumi.*

## Friday

Friday morning. I lift the phone off the bedside table, and look at the time. 05:55. Still got it. I cancel the alarm before it can trigger.

At 6AM, I'm expecting to get a wakeup call from Dad, but I have a cunning plan. I scroll through the contacts and select his number. He's awake already; his job would demand nothing less, but it's still funny to call him first. I'm given the standard speech

about looking after myself, and all the usual parent-y things, and then he wishes me a safe trip.

I fill the kettle from the sink in the bathroom and make myself a cup of tea. There's a good selection of tea and coffee, and the choice is not an easy one. In the end, the English Breakfast wins over an equally tempting Earl Grey. It's too late in the year and too cold in the morning for that much bergamot.

Once the tea is made, I hit the shower for the world's fastest splash-and-dash while it cools. My hair, still nice and short from the haircut I had last week, should dry quickly.

Tea drunk, dressed and ready to roll, I go through my possessions autistically all over again, making sure I leave nothing behind in the hotel room. I shoulder my laptop bag and grab the handle of my suitcase. *Go time. Let's have some fun.*

Down in the lobby, I check out, and the receptionist hands me a smudgy photocopied timetable for the shuttle bus. Five minutes. The bus stop is just the other side of the road from the hotel. As I step outside, I'm met with the fresh, humid air of a new morning. I look up to an overcast sky. It's threatening, but I think things will be okay for the time I'm waiting. The wheels of my big grey suitcase rumble and bump excitedly across the tarmac as I go. *Yes, yes. I'm excited too.* At the bus stop, I check the time. Check-in opens in about 30 minutes, loads of time. Although I know I'm going to be spending quite some time flight-side with a strategy like this, I have a cunning plan. Two hours is more than enough time to get breakfast, and I have a few places in mind.

As I'm anticipating the next part of the journey, two middle-aged women waddle up with their luggage. A few drops of rain fall as I exchange pleasantries with them. They're going off to Brazil, the larger one tells me. *Well, that's nice,* I find myself saying. I'm sure it would be. I make a few other conversational nudges to get them to disclose a few locations, and they rattle off their itinerary. It doesn't sound like my cup of tea, but I'm sure they'll enjoy it. I make a mental note to look up where I might go if I ever find myself in Brazil.

As the women are chatting amongst themselves, the bus

rounds the corner and pulls up. We all pile on, a mess of damp footprints and suitcase tracks following behind us. There are only two seats free, so I stand. It's only a few minutes, and I'm in the best possible mood. The bus picks its way through a few back streets, before joining the main road. Here it has its own dedicated lane, so things progress quickly, and before I know it, we're the other side of the security fences and pulling up to the terminal.

I bump my case out of the bus and roll in through the entrance, a full twenty-five minutes before check-in opens. The first sign to greet me tells me that the check-in desks are at the level above me, so I push the button and wait for the elevator. Emerging on the upper level, I wander over to the departures board and scan down the list to find where I'll be checking in. OK, looks like it'll be Zone B. I wander down that end of the hall and grab a seat.

After a short wait, check-in opens and I hand off my baggage with some small confusion. When you print your boarding pass, the website asks "How many bags total?" and assumes you'll keep one in the cabin, the rest going in the hold. The app asks "How many bags go in the hold?". The self-service kiosks in the airport ask a stupid question that somehow manages to be neither of those things and I get it wrong. The nice lady who looks after the self-service wanders over, smiles and tells me she's seen people do it a hundred times before while correcting my details. I thank her and make a bee-line for security. The wait here is pretty short, and I'm through much faster than I expected. Making my way down into the main concourse, I start by taking a quick look around the duty-free section. This seems to be a complete waste of time - the prices on the shelves here is about the same as it is back in the local supermarket. I move on.

Time for breakfast. There's a little place in the main hall that does sushi, so I take a look to see what takes my fancy. I settle for some cucumber hosomaki, a pot of strawberry yoghurt, some fruit salad, and a 'raw chocolate' bar. *What makes it 'raw'*, I wonder. At the very least, I can tell there's no sugar in it. I take a sip at my



green tea and watch the world go by as I contemplate my next move. I have about 2 hours left to kill, and I need to reserve about 20 minutes of that to catch a shuttle train over to one of the other departure lounges.

The television catches my attention for a moment. The screens are planted throughout the airport, and the newsreaders on the screen have been chattering away at me for the time I've been eating. Now, though, they tell me something I really don't want to hear: The airline I'm flying with today has had a data leak. They're sure that the hackers have taken some of their member's credit card details, and they're currently investigating how bad it is. There's that odd sinking feeling in my gut that can't be caused by a few over-ripe grapes. *Well, shit.* I hope and pray I'm not going to get to the hotel at the other side of this journey only to find my card locked or cleaned out.

I decide I'd better just carry on as planned and hope for the best. If I try to phone the bank now, they won't be able to do much about it with me already through security, and even if they could, they might not need to. I get up and wander around the shops a little, try to take my mind off it. In the end, there's not much worth buying. I do a little test purchase with my card to get a bottle of water for the flight and a few things to snack on. After a slightly longer pause than I'd like with the card machine, everything goes through fine.

I make my way down to the shuttle train and get myself over to the right departure lounge to watch the planes for a bit. Here, the inescapable newsreaders have some good news for once – the airline has put out a statement. The data leak started about 3 weeks *after* I bought my tickets, and only appears to have been capturing newly input cards. *Okay, I'm officially safe to ignore that unless it bites me.*

## **The Piper at the Gates of Boarding**

*Good morning, Ladies and Gentlemen. I'm your captain, Chad McWell-paid, and in the cabin with me this morning is my first officer Saif Para-*

*handz and flight engineer Ubendem Weemendem. On behalf of all the crew, I'd like to welcome you on board this Boeing triple-seven service to Tokyo Haneda airport...*

Finally, after all the planning, all the waiting, I'm on the plane, and we're ready to go. I stow my laptop bag in the overhead compartment, and relax into my chair. Luckily, I've managed to snag premium-but-not-quite-business seats for a small upgrade fee. It's a little better than the "cattle class" setup, so I'm grateful for that. This is the longest flight I've ever been on, so I'm not going to fold myself up into a small space with zero legroom if I don't have to. This part of the cabin is arranged 2-4-2, and I'm assigned the aisle seat on the left of the '4', with an empty seat on my right. It's the last row in this part of the cabin, so I can recline my chair right back to the bulkhead without bothering anyone.

We push back and the flight safety video is played. An assortment of tired but well-loved actors from the 80s and 90s try to get me excited about how to put my seatbelt on and where my oxygen mask is located before begging for money for some charity or another. We taxi out to the runway, and it seems like an eternity before we're granted clearance. The cabin thrums as the engines get pulled up to 40 percent and stabilised. I strain to listen for that one last step. Suddenly, the engines roar as they spool up to full power, and the cabin shakes as we accelerate down the runway. There's a small pull at my stomach and we leave the ground behind us. *Positive rate, gear up.* This holiday has officially begun.

## Week One

### Saturday

With about two hours to go before landing, I find myself sat in the dark with the world's *worst* headache. I ascribe this suffering to three main factors: Not only have I been awake at this point for about eighteen hours, with only three caffeinated drinks, but

the bottle of water that I bought on the plane was nowhere near enough. I needed at least twice what I thought I did. The real problem though, came during the first meal service. I had the fish, but passed on the white wine and got red. It doesn't really go with fish, but I've always preferred red. Not any more.

With about an hour to go, the lights come on in the cabin and we're served what could charitably be described as "breakfast". A small piece of pink shoe-leather that might once have been bacon is flanked with watery mushrooms on one side, and something yellow and rubbery on the other. I take a cautious taste test and find that it reminds me of something that's almost entirely unlike scrambled egg. As I pick my way through this culinary nightmare, I notice a change in the pitch of the aircraft as we descend towards Tokyo...

On the ground, I'm in no rush to get out of the airplane. Although I *do* want to get out of here, there's no point rushing when I have baggage in the hold. That stuff takes as long as it takes, and I can't exactly go anywhere without it. As the cabin becomes a little less crowded, I open the overhead locker and retrieve my stuff, then saunter down the long corridors that lead into the main body of Haneda airport.

I spend some time waiting in the line for immigration and passport control. The imitation cooked breakfast does back-flips in my stomach as I try to look normal. There's a thermal camera pointed at us to try and spot if anyone has a fever, and suddenly I'm feeling very warm and unwell. When I get to the counter, the guard is a very serious 20-something guy. He looks very seriously at me, then at my forms, and points out where I'd forgotten to sign one of them. *Ah, gomen*. He brightens up upon seeing my passport photo, which is quite old and was taken at one of the more interesting points during my education. *Hair different now*. He smiles. *Hai. Student then. Salaryman now*. My fingerprints and a photo are taken, and, with the guard satisfied, the entry sticker goes into my passport.

Next I claim my bags and pass through customs. The ojisan guard there takes one look at me and figures out the content of

my soul instantly. *Are you carrying any medicines on you?* he asks. Out comes the folder. *Yes. There's the e-mail from your guys telling me I don't need a Yakkan Shoumei, here's a certified letter from my doctor telling you what I have and why I take it..* He sifts through the paperwork for a second. *OK. Anything else not shown here?* he asks. *No, that's all.* I'm waved on.

I walk around a small wall and the automatic doors slide open. I'm officially in Japan. With a headache. And nausea. And it's warm, way warmer than I'm used to. The combination of heat and humidity is doing nothing to help me here. I take the *just-do-as-this-says-and-get-to-the-hotel* instructions out of my bag, and make my way over to the ticket machines I've spotted. After a little bit of fumbling around, I manage to get ¥2000 extra on to my PASMO card. So far, so good. I then take a look at the line to redeem my train pass. I don't fancy the wait, and it doesn't need to happen today. I have 16 days out here and a 14-day pass. I figure I'll sleep off my headache and then go get it sorted in Shinjuku station. It's near enough to the hotel that I'll be passing through it every five minutes anyway.

So, some might be wondering – why Haneda? Aren't there more services to Narita these days? Well, sure. But once you get to Narita, you then have to get into Tokyo proper. I've been told that's quite a drag, and I know myself too well to trust that I can navigate for that length of time on that little sleep. Besides, I'd miss an easy chance to do something I really wanted to do – ride the Tokyo Monorail.

The Tokyo Monorail is a lot of fun. There are announcements in English, which is very convenient, Japanese, which is to be expected, and Chinese, which sounds like someone who hates you. Riding the Monorail is a little bit like riding a retired roller-coaster. There are banked turns, dips and climbs, but it's all done at a very sedate 30-40ish miles an hour. We take a route out of the harbour area and follow the main road along the coast up to Hammamatsuchō station.

At Hammamatsuchō, I switch to the Yamanote line and instantly discover a flaw in my instructions. I want to get to Shin-

juku. But the trains here say Tokyo one way, and Shibuya the other. *Oh. Why didn't I note which direction I'd need to go in?* I watch the trains for a moment before thinking *fuck it, Yamanote line is a big circle anyway.* I grab the next one to Shibuya and get myself a seat. *At least there's air-conditioning now.* Because it's Saturday, and just gone 10AM, the number of passengers is reasonable, and I don't have to manhandle my suitcase out of the way too much.

Japanese society grabs you immediately with its little differences. If you're a girl and you're laughing, then covering your mouth is apparently a good idea. It looks cute, at least. But there's a old guy stood opposite me with two fat tram-lines of snot streaming down his face, sniffing and dripping, presumably because he daren't blow his nose in public. OK, so blowing your nose in public is supposed to be kinda rude out here, but he could at least have a mask, or dab at it. I'd rather he just blew it and got it over with. I try not to look at him too much.

As it turns out, going towards Shibuya did give me what I had planned for, but was probably not the fastest option. I change at Shinjuku. Deposited back on the platform, I'm simultaneously baked by the heat and hit with an odd smell that I can't quite place. I imagine it's something akin to frying a ten-day-dead cat with the fur still on. I make way for everyone else on the assumption they'll know where they're going. Once they're passed, I pull a Dirk Gently and follow them down the stairs and out through the ticket gates, before working my way through the giant rabbit warren to the Marunouchi subway line. There's plenty of signs everywhere, including useful coloured lines on the floor. It's a little hard to keep track of the things you want in amongst all the other signs, but as long as you take it easy, things come to you pretty well. This one's pretty easy, just round the corner and down the stairs.

I re-emerge into daylight at Shinjuku-gyoemmae station, M-10. My hotel is a short walk from here. I feel like I've been to this station before, and immediately decide to adopt it for the time I'm in Japan.

*(It's only much later when I get back home that I would come to re-*

*alise where I know my newly adopted station from. It has the unfortunate history to be one of the locations that was affected by the 1995 sarin gas attack, and the area was prominently featured on the news with people being dragged out on stretchers. I guess after an event like that it could do with some love.)*

A few minutes later and I'm at my hotel. I'm super early, and the receptionist apologises for the fact that my room is not ready yet. I know it's not her fault, I'm here way before official check-in but nonetheless no matter what I say she's very sorry anyway. I leave my suitcase with the hotel staff and go for a short walk. This takes me about as far as the end of the road and then back again. It's hot, it's humid, and I'm too tired to wander around in the sun anymore. I make my way back to the hotel and wait for a while in the hotel lobby. Almost as soon as I sit down, the receptionist brings me a little piece of paper so I can connect to the hotel's Wi-Fi. I send a few mails out letting everyone know I've arrived safely, and then reach for my diary.

I only just get time enough to note down some of the details of my travel from the airport to the hotel when my thoughts are interrupted by the receptionist. Apparently my room is ready an hour early. I can't help but wonder if maybe I've given the wrong impression by writing things down like this – perhaps they think I'm reviewing the hotel or something – and I feel a little bit guilty. There's a little bit of paperwork to do, I pay, and then I'm handed my room card.

I ride the lift all the way up to the top floor of the hotel. My room is located right in the far corner, so I get a slightly larger room and looks like only one neighbour. *Nice*. Shuffling my possessions around, I manage to get the door unlocked and drag everything inside. Switching the light on, I cast a critical eye over the space. Just inside the door is tiled flooring, and here lives a small galley-style kitchen with a sink, a kettle, a microwave, and a single induction hob. On the worktop, I find a few bottles of water. Next to this I have enough to make a few cups of tea and coffee. There are "Royal Walton" black teabags, which sounds like it should be a brand that makes toilets or kitchen sinks. Next

to this, I have some super-strong instant coffee with lightning bolts on the packet, some fairly generic green tea, “stick sugar” that come in long packages that look like they should have half-size plastic straws inside them, and something rather ominously called “Creamy Powder”. I guess it will do for the moment.

I drop my case in the middle of the room and check out the bathroom. The sink is just outside the door, on the colder floor tiles that make up part of the entryway. Inside, there’s a deep bathtub with a shower, and the toilet. I decide to get acquainted with the Japanese toilet technology. *Well, now I’m awake again. This is going to take a little getting used to.* There’s no hot-air function to dry afterwards, and the paper is literally 1-ply see-through stuff I have to fold a thousand times. I guess it has much less work to do, so it’s fine. Toilet tech: 9/10, Toilet paper tech: 5/10, adequate but could do better. Immediate concerns sorted, I plonk myself down on the couch and dig through my laptop bag, extracting various bits of tech. I set myself up on the coffee table and pull a few extra notes from my stash into my wallet. At this point, I’ve been awake for over 24 hours, so I need to sleep, but I want get some food to put in the fridge first. I don’t want to be figuring out how to not be hungry when I wake up at two in the morning or something.

There’s a Lawson just down the road from the hotel, and I stick my head around the door, not knowing quite what to expect. *Irasshaimase~!* Well, I wasn’t quite expecting that. The nearest member of staff is right near the door, and delivers his welcome at a volume the CEO can hear all the way back in head office. I bow slightly, not knowing what else to do, and grab a basket. There are some onigiri with tuna mayo in the fridge. I feel good about the fact that I can recognise this from the label directly, before realising I’m subconsciously reading the English underneath anyway. *So much for immersion learning.* I also grab a small salad. There’s no tea other than green tea here, so I pass on it for now.

Back in the hotel, I dump everything into the fridge and put the “do not disturb” sign on the door. Hungry can now officially

wait for later. Removing my shoes and socks, I make fists with my toes and walk around barefoot for a bit before making my way to bed.

*Nope, doesn't work. Stupid films.*

I wake up again at about half four and munch on the onigiri. *Hm. Not bad, but about what you'd expect for ¥100.* I go stand under the shower for entirely way too long in an attempt to feel somewhat human before heading outside. I figure the best thing I can do at this point is to get outside for a bit, wander around the block and acclimate myself to the day/night cycle by experiencing it directly. Just outside the hotel, I stop, and for a moment allow the whole world to pass in front of me while I decide which way I'd like to go. It's not dark yet, but the sun is just starting the process of setting, and the air is much cooler. Despite my fatigue, despite the aching, fuzzy feeling in my head, despite the lack of a functioning train pass...or maybe because of it all...it finally sinks in.

The ground under me? Japanese soil.

The sky above me? Japanese air.

These salarymen walking past? Serious Japanese business.

Those plants? Japanese bushes.

The deafening little *min-min* cicadas even have a Japanese accent.

## Sunday

Six forty-five. By now I've been awake-ish for the last two hours, drifting in and out of sleep, but this seems to be the point at which I feel both 'awake' and rested. My eyes are not quite as bloodshot now as they were the day before; all that dry air when you're flying is bad for you.

Tokyo. So, first impressions, having seen all of the airport and a few streets...it's much neater than I was expecting. Even in the places where it's disorganised, it's clean. Most of the large cities and towns I've been to – even the ones that would be considered “nice” – have this slightly lived-in quality to them that



isn't here. It's pretty far from an open meadow, but the locals obviously look after this place.

It helps that there are lots of little green spaces dotted around: parks, temples, bushes, trees...I think without these a city of this size wouldn't work so well.

I've used the last of the Royal Walton black tea provided to me by the hotel, along with some of the odd but passable Creamy Powder. Today, I think I'd like to find a proper supermarket. Must be one around somewhere, and I bet they have proper milk. Yesterday's trip to the conbini only yielded the Tuna Onigiri and the Salad, and I have a proper rice cooker loaned to me by the hotel. Better find some rice too.

I jump into the shower first, and then shave while deciding what to do with the day. Unlike the simple shaving kit that I used the other day, my "proper" toiletries contain a tube of shaving cream that smells of roses, a double-edge safety razor, and a fresh pack of Feather blades. I like these blades in particular because they have a reputation for being the sharpest. Coincidentally, they're made in Japan. The fact that they've travelled halfway around the world only to return home is not lost on me.

I step out into the warm air. I've decided to start with a little wander through the shops in the Shinjuku labyrinth and see what's there. Almost accidentally, I stumble across the JR offices while scouting out the station's labyrinth and redeem my train pass. Now I can go pretty much as far as I want. I make a mental note of where I am and decide to come back later with my request for the Shinkansen tickets. I've been told that the Japanese are reasonable with their English, but they're not so confident, so if you can write stuff down, they're better off that way. I'll find that notepad back in the hotel room and get my tickets tomorrow morning on the way out.

In the afternoon, I make my way to the Meiji shrine. The crows in this city are as large as roosters, and noisy as you like. Their calls reverberate off the buildings as you wander through the streets, often without being able to see the crows themselves. Here, though, there are no buildings, so they come down to the

paths and hop around with the humans. Probably keeping an eye on us.

I make my way from Harajuku station up along the path, making sure to pass through each of the *Torii* off to one side. Although I've never seen a *kami* walk through a gate, the Japanese seem to reckon that when they do, it's in the middle, and you shouldn't anger them. I'll play nice for the sake of the people as much as the spirits. If there are any, the crows might tell on me.

The path takes me deep into the forest surrounding the shrine. I'm grateful for the cooler air that's down here, and the canopy of leaves that mostly covers the path. About halfway up, there's a small souvenir shop and a restaurant. Just outside, there's a small stall selling drinks. I take a break here and buy some ramune. I lean against a nearby wall for a moment, with a large metal sign just behind me. I've taken a few sips when I'm startled by a small clang – something has just struck the sign behind me. Turning, I meet the gaze of a crow that has landed there. *Konnichiwa.*

Leaving my feathered friend behind, I carry on walking up. The first thing I see are barrels of wine and sake, left as an offering for the Emperor Meiji and his wife Shōken. I wonder what happens to all this stuff over time. It looks like it's renewed on a regular basis, so the old stuff must go somewhere...

Wandering the rest of the way up, I get to the shrine itself. I step out into a small area with a massive *Torii* in front of me, and a small water font off to the left. Following the instructions carefully, I purify myself before wandering through the gate. I quickly find myself in a large courtyard, and at the far end, is the shrine itself. I pay my respects to the man who opened the doors to Japan and leave a few coins. Without him, I might not be here right now. I also get a little poem from the Empress –

*To pass one's days unworried  
By any trifling thing –*

*Surely therein will be found  
The potion of long life.*

In other words, I shouldn't worry too much about the small stuff and take it easy. Gotcha.

On my way back down, I pop into the gift shop. I buy myself a small tea cup that changes between two patterns when it gets warm: bamboo (cold) and cherry blossom. I've decided that, because smell can be one of the best ways to unlock memories, I'll try to buy some incense at each temple I go to, so I pick out the one that reminds me the most of this place. I also spot a small shoji screen, about 40x30cm. The small piece of paper inside the box tells me that the design is the classic "Pine Trees and Cranes" by Anonymous. *You paint well, random Japanese Anon from the distant past.* I have to have it.

Popping back out at Shinjuku-gyoemmae station on my way back, I duck into a nearby Family Mart. I grab a few other sweets here, very much on the bargain end of things, as well as some mango sorbet-style thing called "Ice Monster". *He looks cheerful.* I also throw some crisps into the basket on my way round. From the package, they seem to be "angry red daruma" flavour. *Never had those before.* There's also some bargain-basement rice, so I grab a pack of that.

Thankfully, I also spot some black tea, and more importantly, milk. I've been told that some of the cartons have a notch on them so that blind people can recognise the "real milk". Apparently a lot of it is shipped in as powder and re-hydrated in the factory. So, notched milk for the win? We'll see. I also add a big bottle of Pocari Sweat to my basket, as well as some Meiji brand dark choco. Seems appropriate.

Back in the hotel room, the feast is laid out before me: Chicken and egg salad, Ice Monster, choco marshmallows, some crisps, and a cup of Earl Grey tea. I make a point of starting with the nice healthy salad. The top leaves are lettuce, but everything

underneath seems to be shredded cabbage. *Bleh*. I guess you can't ask for miracles at ¥100. I'll eat this one, but I'm not going to have that again. The Ice Monster is basically just mangoes, mashed, squeezed, and then frozen. It tastes really intense, and I like it. The crisps are straight-up chilli. They burn, but it's not just a boring "this is hot", there's an interesting fruit-like quality to them. Jalapeños, perhaps? It's not wasabi, that's for sure. To finish, I test a few marshmallow-coated chocolates, and some of the Meiji choco. Both are good.

## Monday

Monday rolls around, and I decide that I've been here for long enough without getting a proper overview of this place. That means I have two choices. Either I go to the Tokyo Skytree...or I can go to the Tokyo Government Building. There's advantages and disadvantages to both, but for me, the fact that you can get into the Tokyo Government Building for free with a minimal waiting line tips the balance. At least, I'll start here and if I end up feeling like it's not enough, I can always go to the Skytree with nothing lost but a little time.

When I arrive, there's a small line that goes out to the carpark. I count about 20 people in front of me, and the line is soon moving. Just before the lifts, I'm subjected to a bag-check, and then it's all the way up to the top floor. The lift accelerates pretty hard, and we're at the 45th floor in no time. At the top, I have a chat with an old lady who volunteers as a tour guide. She asks about political stuff back home, and to stay polite I'm biting my tongue a little when responding. At the same time, she's taken a genuine interest and I feel like I need to be truthful with the things I do say. When a random 3rd person digs their oar in and starts carping on, we change the subject very quickly back to holiday-related things until he pisses off.

I take a few photos of the Pre-Neo Tokyo skyline. It's very pretty, as far as cities go. It's interesting to see the big green

patches given wholly over to shrines and parks. The visibility isn't the best today, though. I can't really see Fuji. I suppose it's better I found this revelation out for free. There's a small gift shop, and I select a few fridge magnets and postcards. I've decided to do more things in the middle of the day that involve being inside. It's not the heat that really gets you, it's the humidity. Now that I have my rail pass, I can bounce around a bit more than is economical, if it puts me in a nice air-conditioned location in the middle of the day. My PASMO can be relegated mostly to getting me in and out on the Marunouchi line – either to Tokyo or Shinjuku station, depending on where I'm going. I'll probably burn a large hole in it when I get to Kyoto.

I use the evening to check out Nakano Broadway and the surrounding market. You step off the train, and just across the road is a covered street that leads up to the Broadway itself. There are plenty of food stalls, and I take the opportunity to try a few different things on the way up, not really caring what they are. I just point like a barbarian, offer up some English and with a few *kudasais* get what I'm interested in. Most of it is pretty good, although I'm glad that I don't know what something is when I don't like it.

Nakano Broadway is interesting. There's a few general shops that sell groceries, or handbags, but I'm not really there for that. There are some up-to date shops for anime and manga related stuff, but the far more interesting part for me is that it's got lots of little shops that tend to lean towards older and more obscure otaku stuff, and not just in the animé-related world either. There's one shop in particular that seems to be a treasure-trove of Japanese history – I find myself looking at old cameras, maps, stamps, banknotes, photos, watches and a load more besides. It seems like if someone finds it collectible, the guy running this shop would have something for you. I think about buying something, but quickly get the feeling that if I did take something home with me, I'd be taking something too valuable. This stuff looks like it should mean something to people.

Wow. Fruit salads in Tokyo are sharp as *fuck*. All the citruses

seem to be present and accounted for here.

## Tuesday

The day starts with a trip to Akihabara. As it turns out, otaku the whole world over are the same in one very specific way - they don't get out of bed at 8AM on a Tuesday morning. Almost all the shops are shut here, which is fine for now. I'll come back later this evening, but in the meantime, I can still take a few snaps. The weather is much cooler now, and I'm glad for it. There's a nice breeze, and the sky is overcast. Of course, this leads to rain pretty soon afterwards. I duck into a nearby konbini and buy myself a ¥500-and-somethingish umbrella. These things seem to be pretty much disposable items out here. They're always piled up in the racks at the various entryways to buildings, and it's not so many days before I'm unsure if the umbrella I keep with me is the one I actually bought. I amuse myself with the idea that there is really only one konbini umbrella. The clear one I have with the white handle is when The Umbrella gets bought and travels forward in time, and when it reaches the heat-death of the Universe it turns black and travels backwards until it returns to the umbrella factory where it can be un-made and then re-made. This is, of course, bunk.

I've been recommended a few places to go eat, and one of them is a restaurant near Yoyogi Park. I decide to go and check that out, jumping off at Yoyogi-Hachiman station and walking down. The sun comes out pretty soon afterwards and slowly bakes me to a crisp as I walk. Real Men never ask for directions, and now that I'm here the instructions I've been given have clearly been written by a blind lunatic on acid. Crucially, they don't actually say the name of the place, so I couldn't ask anyone or look it up even if I wanted to. The further I walk, the less things seem to bear any relationship to the instructions, but it's an interesting neighbourhood. Eventually I figure I've gone the wrong way, and when a train station presents itself, I give the fa-

bled location up as a lost cause. *I'll just say it was closed or something.*

Akihabara in the late afternoon is much more like I was expecting. I come out of the station and fall into the first shop that's there. There's a lot more stuff here, but it seems to be more the mainstream and popular things. Also, because tourists "know" that this is the place to come, there's a lot of pandering to that. There are a few big souvenir shops, selling the same stuff that you'd see anywhere else, probably. I wander the streets, going into any place that takes my interest. I spend some time eyeing up a PC that has a seriously interesting case - rather than the standard tower configuration, it's a big red cube, stood on one flattened corner. As the fans ramp up, vents open and close as if it's breathing. It reminds me a little of a giant digital pufferfish. I doubt I'll find the case when I go back home, but I'll have to look it up anyway. I come away in the end with a few gifts for the family - a package of neko-meido *langues de chat*, chopsticks, t-shirts, postcards, as well as some minidiscs for my Walkman. This ends up being a critical error, as I now have to drag them around with me for the next two weeks. I'm also under instructions to buy a figure. When asked, the request was *get me one of the ones with big tits*. Okay, you're my friend, and sometimes I think you're a little *misguided* in your tastes...but I will do this thing for you. I get a Sonico figure that is designed to wrap around the average Japanese bottle. I'll get some Ramune to go with her and she'll be an interesting gift. The clerk wraps her up in a special black bag, and I only realise when I'm out in the street rearranging my stuff, that people might assume it's something more lewd than I actually have...

In the evening, I make my way over to Shibuya. There's only two reasons to be here that I know off the top of my head. The first is to say hello to Hachikō. The second, of course, is to cross the road. Shibuya is well known for its crossing just outside the station - it is a popular clip to insert into many different films and documentaries, and it's understandable why. Joining the crowds, I wait for the lights to turn, then follow everyone else diagonally across the road. It's a strange feeling, much like a fish

might feel swimming upstream. As we cross, there's an equal and opposite number of bodies making the same trek in the other direction, and it's quite a challenge to dodge them all. I continue on into the store just there on the corner, which happens to be selling CDs and books. I spend some time looking around, before moving on to other places.

On the way back, I wander through the Odakyu food market – I'd spotted it down in the guts of Shinjuku station the other day, and was curious to see what kind of things they might be selling. This is the kind of food that ends up all over social media: Flawless, shiny and beautifully packaged. The cakes and other sweet treats are all very pretty and picture-perfect, with price tags to match. I end up buying some chestnut mochi out of curiosity, and because they're just about the only thing in the store that won't require a mortgage. The lady I hand my money to makes a big deal about wrapping them up. It's fun to watch something that simple be executed with that level of skill, and I guess I already paid for it...I end up trying one with a whisky highball and a warm bath. *Not bad. I could get used to this.*

## Wednesday

Yet again, I find myself awake at an insanely early hour. Being a total night-owl back home, suddenly becoming a morning person has me come over all philosophical. Perhaps I'm meant to be here, or something. This train of thought is interrupted as the screen between me and the bed starts to shake...and then just as soon as it started, it's over. Not even enough to wake most people, but a quick check with the USGS website confirms it: *Namazu* has tickled me gently.

I'm struck by how easily the kids here navigate Tokyo, and Shinjuku station in particular. Some of them, hardly tall enough to see over the ticket barriers, walk through this place on their way to school as if they designed and built the entire station themselves. Although I can remember roughly where some-



thing is, I'm finding out the hard way that my sense of direction is only two-dimensional. I've had a few moments in this place where I need to find a set of stairs or an elevator before things start to make sense again.

Today, I have two places I want to see: Senso-ji and Senkaku-ji. I decide to start with Senso-ji, which is one of Tokyo's most popular and well known shrines, sat right next to Tokyo's oldest Buddhist temple. I arrive at Asakusa station early enough that when I reach the Kaminarimon Gate and peek past the giant lantern there, I can see a whole host of closed shops leading down to the Hōzōmon Gate beyond. That suits me, I know I'll need to come back this way so I can look in on the various shops as I make my way back. I pause to take a few photos of the statues here - they are representations of the Gods of Wind and Thunder - before wandering down Nakamise to the Hōzōmon Gate. On the back of this gate, there are a pair of giant straw sandals. Touching them is supposed to help you become a "goodwalker" - I think this is meant in terms of walking the path to spiritual enlightenment and happiness, and not so much putting one foot in front of the other, but I'm planning to be doing a lot of walking on this holiday in both kinds of ways. I reach up and touch the straw, hoping that I'll be looked after.

Slightly further down, there's a large *jokoro* filled with sand, and out of it are burning sticks of incense. Although it's not yet ten in the morning, there are a large number of incense sticks already planted here by people donating their money, and people are busily wafting the thick smoke over their heads. I walk up and do the same. *When in Rome...* Just off to the side, there's another one of those fountains. I take the time to purify myself, and then climb the steps to the temple. Inside, there are some pretty impressive statues, including Kannon, goddess of Mercy, to whom this temple is erected. Although there are signs everywhere saying *not* to take photos, there are a few Chinese tourists who are steadfastly ignoring that. I feel bad about this, but not for very long. Interestingly, a leaflet I pick up tells me that at one point, a monk was given a divine message and told in no uncer-

tain terms that the statue would be in danger. He took the original, hid it around the back where nobody could see it, and left a carefully constructed copy at the front. So, I guess it's not too bad if you take a photo of the copy, right? *If the gods saw that one coming, then I, for one, am suitably impressed.*

I buy myself a good luck charm in the temple shop and then take a wander through the gardens. There's a lot here that's very pretty, and so I find myself taking pictures of statues, plants, Koi ponds...as well as the outside of the shrine, the temple and the nearby five-story pagoda. On my way back I take a small rest at an area where wooden seats are covered over by a big frame with some sort of wisteria climbing all over it. There's a gentle misting of the air here, which combines with the shade to cool you down very effectively.

On my way back down, all the shops in Nakamise street have opened, and I take my time looking through the various stalls for something that takes my fancy. I come away with some green tea flavoured with yuzu, and a cute little wind chime in the shape of a bell.

Next, I make my way back to Asakusa station, and on to Senkaku-ji. This is a Zen temple notable mainly for being the final resting place of the 47 Rōnin, whose story is not only popular throughout Japanese history, but is also well known worldwide, having been adapted repeatedly into plays, television shows and films showcasing the loyalty, determination and devotion these men had. As such, there's not much I can say about them that hasn't already been said a thousand times before. For modern-day Japan, Senkaku-ji holds meaning for anyone that wants to put a long-running plan into action and be successful. It's therefore become popular with businessmen and students who want to make an offering before undertaking a large task. I offer incense in the hopes that they are resting well, and that my trip continues to work out, before buying a few postcards (photography seems disrespectful, given that there are a few locals here also), and visiting the little museum.

As to pondering the often-asked question "What if Kira had

died before the revenge attack could happen?”, much has been said about how honourable or not various aspects of it were, or if a samurai should even consider undertaking such a thing. I shall defer to those who are far more knowledgeable than I am on those counts. My answer is one that I suspect only a foreigner might get away with giving: *Lucky for the poets and playwrights of this world that he didn't.*

## Thursday

I start my day with the idea that I might take advantage of my new-found daylight persona. I'm out of the hotel before it's properly light in order to see Tsukiji Fish Market. I'm already way too late to see the tuna auctions, but at least I should get there in time to see things working as they should be. Tsukiji isn't really a "proper" tourist destination, but people like to go and see it. As such, the access to the general public is quite limited, and there's a leaflet with a map on it to tell you which parts of the market you're allowed to be in and when. Even sticking to the "allowed" areas, you really need to have eyes in the back of your head to make sure you don't get run over. The turret trucks and other vehicles that move the boxes of fish around aren't expecting to wait for anyone or anything. You can't walk around just looking up, either. Chunks of ice, used to keep the fish cool, end up strewn across the floor. In places where the buildings are packed closer together, deliveries are strapped to the back of a moped and then fired down the alleyway with little regard for the random people milling around. I buy a few T-shirts before stopping to eat. There's a few places here to have breakfast, and how can I not try what claims to be the freshest fish in all Japan? I settle for a simple tuna bowl with some rice, and while I'm not a connoisseur of raw fishes, it goes down surprisingly well.

The main target for today is a train out towards Kawasaki, and the Nihon Minka-en. It's a museum with a little something different about it. Because it's a museum of different types of tra-

ditional houses, everything is outside. By this point, I've been to the Tokyo Museum already. Although it's interesting to see how royalty and those otherwise of status lived, I've always felt that if you really want to understand a country and its culture, you *have* to know something about the "little people" too. How they lived, what jobs they did, what their hopes and dreams were, how they died, that kind of thing. It's also a great reference for painting and drawing – literally everywhere you turn you'll find something new and exciting to look at.

As I'm wandering around, I notice that some of the houses have older folks tending to fires in the fireplaces. In this heat, that confuses me for a minute, and I watch them working while I try to think. Suddenly, I realise what the reason for these fires must be – the fires are burned with deliberate intent to create as much smoke and unpleasant air as possible. They're fumigating the houses and driving all the bugs out.

In one of the houses, I meet three old folks. There are two guys and a lady, and we get to chatting. One of the guys explains to me at length – in slightly broken English – about horses and how this house was used. I'm interested, but I'm not sure I got all of it. As I'm leaving, the other guy – who to this point has been mostly silent – hands me a gift. While his co-conspirators have been distracting me, he's taken a few blades of grass in his hands, and by careful folding and wrapping, made one into a grasshopper and the other a snail. I bow and thank him for his generous gift before continuing on my way to see the rest of the houses.

Apart from the houses themselves, one of the things I notice is that Japan has some pretty big ants, and some great big fuck-off hornets to go with them. I try my best to avoid angering them as I walk past a hornet's nest, giving it the widest birth the path will allow me. I've never been stung in my life, so finding out how I react to the business end of a thousand pissed off hornets isn't on my list of things to do today.

By the time I get back to the train, I notice that I've lost my grasshopper and I'm rather disappointed about this. I ponder the idea of re-tracing my steps, before realising that even if I did,

the wind has probably taken him away.

Later that evening as I'm going to sleep, I'm informed by the news that one of the Shinkansen was delayed today "due to a collision with a bear" and that the management is very sorry for this inconvenience. *Sorry to other humans, sure, but what about the bears?*

## Friday

It's one thing to take a few nice snaps for the memories and to show the folks back home, but if you're spending all your time staring at it through the viewfinder, are you really experiencing being there? Just as I'm starting to think I've been spending too much time behind the camera, and not enough time just *being...*

Friday afternoon, I catch the train out to Mitaka. When I arrive at the station, I find that I'm just in time to come down the stairs and grab the bus outside. Although it is not Catbus, it is decorated with some of the little creatures featured in the opening credits for *Totoro*. The ride up to the museum is only a few minutes, and although it wouldn't have been any trouble to have walked it...how can you not ride the not-Catbus?

When I arrive at the Ghibli Museum and line up outside, I'm equal parts disappointed and relieved that they tell you not to take photographs inside. Mostly, though, I'm just glad to be here. This is one of those places I've always wanted to go, even before they built it. Most kids growing up around me at the same time I did got Disney and not so much else. I had Ghibli, and I loved it. As we're waiting in line, one of the employees walks down to greet everyone, checking each group or person's printed tickets to make sure they match up to the details in their passport. As he reaches me I hope and pray that I haven't gotten my details wrong while registering and thereby fumble-fingered my way out of the single most important part of my trip. I hold my breath and hand over my paper. He takes one look, scans the QR code, checks my passport, smiles, and then waves me on down the line. Just inside, there's a lady behind the counter who gives

me my “proper” ticket – it’s a piece of colourful card with a window holding a few frames of actual film inside it. Holding it up so that the light shines through the film, I squint and see a few jellyfish. *Looks like they come from Ponyo. Cool.* There’s a few instructions and another leaflet, and then I’m directed where to go. I turn to the left and there’s a flight of stairs. About halfway down it strikes me that there are no more barriers, no more waiting, no more questions, no more “you’re going to screw this up” moments left, and I’m here. Things get a little bit dusty.

Inside the museum, there’s a few exhibits on how films are made – there’s a de-constructed projector in a big glass box with a huge loop of film running through it, and you can peer at it from all angles to see what the various components are doing to the film as it passes through. There’s also a really cute merry-go-round type thing with a scene from Totoro on it. As the motor speeds up, a strobe light flickers at 24 times a second, and when both are in sync, suddenly all the different poses of each character merge into one and you can see Catbus running across the grass, Totoro bouncing about and so on, right there in front of you. Going upstairs, you get to see how the animators actually worked with re-creations of their working areas along with loads of concept sketches and other reference materials. Up here, there’s also a giant stuffed Catbus in one of the rooms. Kids were climbing around all over him, and for the first time in a long while, I wished I was twelve or younger again so I could go and hug the Catbus. Not allowed.

Up on the roof, there are a few icons from my favourite Ghibli film, Laputa. Climbing up the stairs, you emerge in a small tower, with a bridge to the main body of the roof. Here, there’s a big Robot waiting for you, and since we’re not inside, he’s OK to photograph and hold his hand – at least, everyone else was, so I wasn’t going to not do it. Just around the corner, there’s a giant black stone cube, carved with Laputian runes. One Japanese guy strode confidently up, slapped his hand on it, and exclaimed “balus!” at great volume, which caught me by surprise. Well, okay. I wasn’t expecting it to bring the whole of the Ghibli Mu-

seum crashing down around me, but it still seemed kinda strange to do it, given what it would represent. Each to their own, I suppose. When he left, I placed my hand gently on the stone. *Dōmo.*

Down on the ground floor, there's a small courtyard with a well. Here, just under the stairs and out of view of anyone else, I found a small alcove that is painted as if I'm looking out over the town of Koriko, from *Kiki's Delivery Service*.

The highlight of the day came with the Saturn Theatre. I got to see *Mei and the Kittenbus*. It's a small but highly lovable feature, about 5-10 minutes long, that runs as a continuation of *My Neighbour Totoro*. Mei is playing out in the fields, eating some caramel sweets when she gets blown about by a gust of wind. Chasing it around for a bit, she eventually manages to corner it inside the house, where it reveals itself as a very cute Kittenbus. Mei being Mei, she offers it a Caramel and makes friends before it leaves with Catbus. Later on, in the evening, Mei is woken again by the Kittenbus, who takes her to see Totoro and the Grandma Catbus, who is a kind of giant airship. Mei feeds it her last caramel, and – although there's a little bit of coughing – thankfully the Catship doesn't choke on it. All of Totoro-kind board the Catship, and off they fly of into the night.

Finally, I found my way to the giftshop. Here, I was suddenly and swiftly deprived of ¥20,000. I think I got away pretty lightly, all things considered. By the time I go to make my way back to the station, the sky had opened up and it was raining hard. The not-Catbus takes me on a steamy-windowed lap of the city centre before depositing me back at the train station. I wonder what I might get to eat with less than ¥300 on me.

*The ¥100 cabbage salads are calling again. Oh no.*

## Week Two

### Saturday

My stay in Tokyo over, it's time to catch the Shinkansen for the first time and go to Kyoto. I check out of the hotel early and take the Marunouchi line over to Tokyo station. There's a fair amount of time to wait, so I wander about in order to find a good ekiben to take with me. I end up with a banana, a bottle of matcha green tea, and a very nice beef-and-rice box with veggies. The station itself is very busy, but pretty easy to navigate. The signposts for the Shinkansen are everywhere. Soon, the time approaches and I'm up on the platform. The platform itself is marked so that you know ahead of time where each carriage is going to stop, so you can just stand by the right gate and wait. This is crucial, especially in stations part-way through the route, as the train won't stop for very long. Here in Tokyo, we have a few moments longer to wait while the cleaning staff work their way through the train. As I watch through the window for one of the cabins, I see something awesome – the last step in the process is to have someone walk down the aisle, and there's some sort of a release button for each pair of seats. As the cleaner passes by, she turns all the seats around so that nobody will be going backwards.

Soon, I'm nice and comfy in my seat, and we're making our way out of Tokyo. It takes a while to get out from the built-up areas with tighter bends, but once we do, the driver puts the hammer down and there's a noticeable feeling of acceleration. By the time we hit maximum speed, I'm well into my ekiben brunch. Even though the world outside is whipping past at a vast speed, everything inside the cabin is peaceful and calm. The little tray-table in front of me is hardly even shaking.

I arrive in Kyoto just after lunchtime. The train journey has given me plenty of time to think on things. First off, in my sleep deprived state the other day, when I'd calculated how much cash I could spend per day, I'd counted wrongly. When I'm travelling



on the Shinkansen, just a few leftover coins in my pocket can be enough to get something to eat and drink, so I don't really need to count that as part of a day. Also, I didn't spend so much on the first day of my holiday, since I was travelling from the airport and sleeping. As for the last day of my holiday as I was counting it – I'll be in the air for most of that time anyway. Whatever is left over for the airport is what I'll spend. This allows me to *just about* justify the fact that I went into the Acorn Republic in Tokyo station. Again, faced with more Ghibli merch, I can't really say no. In my defence, though, I was rather restrained and totally classy about my selections this time. I bought a beautiful Catbus cup and saucer set.

Out here, I've rented a little house. It's one of those old-style houses in Kyoto that doesn't really command much money in the local market, but rather sadly is often torn down and replaced with more modern earthquake-proof buildings. I understand totally why the locals do that, but I love the fact that this one has been refurbished and saved, even if it's all in the name of profiting from tourists. Inside it's all old-school tatami mats and twisted roof beams. It reminds me very much of some of the houses I saw in the Nihon Minka-en, only this one comes with some more modern furniture, too. Although, I think it's fair to say I'd probably have a rather different opinion of it come wintertime. No straight lines anywhere and gaps under doors is a good way to freeze. I get all my stuff stowed away and the welcome pack on the kitchen table tells me how everything works and what I might do in the local area. I fold the complimentary copy of the hand-drawn map and place it in my wallet, then head for the closest supermarket I can find to add some food to the fridge.

The afternoon is bright and warm, but not nearly as oppressively humid as Tokyo was. I spend some time back in Kyoto Station itself, taking the escalator all the way up to the rooftop garden at one end. As a general rule, I love sky gardens, and this one looks like it'd be a nice place for a bashful salaryman and his cute office lady love interest to spend a lunch break together. There

are great views of the city on three sides, so I get out the camera and take a few snaps before heading back into the metro and on to Nijō castle.

When I arrive at Nijō castle, there's only about an hour before closing time. That means I don't have as much time to spend here as perhaps I might have liked, but there are relatively few people walking around, so I'm happy to make the compromise; the photos are far better without a load of random tourists in them. The phrase "This is the Real Japan™" gets thrown around a lot by people. Most of them are trying to sell you something. This, however, might actually be a part of it. In the late afternoon, with the gently setting sun, the gardens here are exquisite. Kyoto generally feels more "Japanese" to me than Tokyo, although both are good. Nijō castle itself, though, has good reason to lay claim to being "Real Japan", having been built as a place for the Tokugawa Shōgunate to stay whilst in Kyoto, and the site of the Imperial Court. It's interesting to see the inside, and many of the panels are decorated in the same style as the mini shoji screen I bought back at the Meiji shrine. Because of the age and delicate nature of the pigments in these kinds of things, there are plenty of signs telling you that you shouldn't take photos to prevent damage from the flash. A few of the Chinese tourists still left wandering around at this hour carried on anyway.

Food in the evening was bell peppers, bok choy, very thinly sliced beef, mushrooms and some soy sauce. It's a kind-of a half-assed sukiyaki, and it went quite well. There's a Zojirushi rice-cooker here, so I fired that up, too. Although some of the other rice cookers I've used have been pretty good, the elephant undeniably takes top position of the ones I've used so far. Not only does it cook rice better, but it has a magnetic power cord, too. Must try and get one for back home.

It was this evening that I met my first Japanese cockroach. Late in the evening, I decided I'd check out what was on the local television. While I was flicking through the channels, I suddenly became aware of the cockroach that had slipped in under the door and was now washing his antennae just under the tele-

vision. I paused for a moment, not knowing quite what I wanted to do with him. *You wanna watch Nichijou as well?* I forced myself to move, and slipped out to the kitchen where I rummaged around in the kitchen – all the while painfully aware that I had my back to this thing, the bedroom and bathroom doors open, and it might disappear at any point. You know when all you've got is a hammer, everything starts to look like a nail? I didn't have a hammer, but I did have a can of fly-spray that had been left under the kitchen sink. I don't know much about roaches, but if this stuff messes up flies, it might at least be unpleasant to him.

Blasted with an aerosol jet of permethrin and half a dozen chemicals that cause hyperactivity in young children, Mr Roach decides that possession of a can of fly spray constitutes nine-tenths of the law, and leaves in much the same way as he arrived. I'm not sure if I gave him a large enough dose to actually kill, or if that was more like flinging Flintstones Chewable Vitamins at a heroin addict. Either way, out of sight is out of mind, and shortly after I make my way to the futon laid out for me, making sure to slide the bedroom door *very* firmly shut.

## Sunday

Sunday morning brings light rain and cooler weather, and I wake early with the overwhelming feeling that I need to be somewhere.

At around 7:30 in the morning, I find myself under the covered walkway for Teramachi-dori, one of the streets just a little way from Nishiki Market. The place is pretty quiet at this hour; all of the shops are closed, and the only people here are bringing their vans slowly up and down the street to make deliveries before anyone opens.

I stop by one of the little side-streets, where I notice a vending machine. Extracting the coins left in my pocket, I poke them around for a moment, counting to myself, before deciding on an

iced coffee with milk. The breeze here is cool and gentle, and I stand just underneath the covered area while I drink. As I'm stood there, I don't have a single thought in my head. I'm just watching the rain fall and listening to the crows calling in the distance. As I do, there's a warm feeling of peacefulness that gently washes over me. I've found the furthest point from all the things that cause me to suffer, and it's right here and now, just next to this vending machine.

Drink finished, I let my feet go where they will, and shortly find myself taking a solo tour of Pontocho, before wandering back up the Kamo river, the gravel pathway crunching excitedly under my feet. The rain dances across the flowing water, tapping a gentle polyrhythm on my umbrella as I walk. Because they are here – and because there are no people to judge me for doing it – I talk to the crows as I go. Sharing this moment with me as they are, I feel perhaps they might understand.

It's calm, just calm, and I like it.

## Monday

When I wake up, the rain is pouring down pretty hard, so I decide to do as many indoor things as I can today. This starts out with a trip to the Aeon Mall, which is a minute's walk from Kyoto Station. It's quite an interesting place, there's a supermarket on the ground floor and I spend some time stocking up on some essentials. Bacon and eggs for breakfast tomorrow sounds like a good idea for starters. On the upper floors, there's plenty of more "specialist" stores, and I spend a while looking around before getting something for lunch. I'm impressed by the variety of things that they have here. The mall is split into two buildings and I spend some time in a music shop in the "secondary" building. I've wanted to look for some music while I'm out here, but the order in which things are sorted is baffling. There's an ojisan manning the fort here, and although we both try to make ourselves understood, he doesn't speak a word of English and seems

to be slightly deaf to boot. Of course, being totally unprepared for the encounter, it somehow doesn't occur to me to just pull my phone out, or mention artists I'm interested in and have him point.

There's also a Muji in the Aeon Mall, and I spend a little time in there stocking up on stationery. Although I can get some Muji stuff back home, the selection is quite limited and the nearest store is about an hour and a half away from me. Although I do have a few things that take me over that way once or twice a year, for practical reasons, most of my purchases end up being made online. It's really nice to see the entire range of things that are available and to be able to pick them up and decide what might work for me and what won't. One thing that I'm surprised at is the range of foods that Muji does here in Japan. I'm burning a ton of calories out here, so I find myself needing to eat more food than I would normally. I pick up a few heat-it-and-eat-it pouches that grab my attention, and also a few random snacks and sweets that look good. I also buy a small spray bottle. The Internet tells me that one of the best non-lethal ways to disable a cockroach is to blast them with a little soapy water. Apparently it gets in their breathing tubes and they can't run away fast enough.

I wander back through Kyoto Station to get back on the subway. Just inside the entrance, there's a waterfall that is made up of loads of computer-controlled water jets in the ceiling. I stand there for a moment and watch it cycle through patterns and various messages. It's quite hypnotic.

Later, I go for a wander through Nishiki Market. Given the weather, it seems that pretty much everyone else had exactly the same idea, and the place is heaving. That's no bad thing, I think that's how places like this are supposed to look. I stop off at a few of the food vendors and try a few things out, including some very tasty wagyu beef that is seared in front of you on the grill. I pop into a small shop and buy some sakura tea. I've been asked by my aunt if I can bring some sakura coffee back, but after looking around, I've come to the conclusion it's the wrong time of the year for that kind of thing. I buy two pouches of sakura tea,

thinking that one way or the other, I'm going to want some for myself.

I've been sleeping pretty well on tatami mats for the last few days. It helps that I'm running around for 8-12 hours each day and pretty much destroying my feet, but I'm surprised at just how comfy a bit of grass and a futon can actually be. I'm thinking I might try to buy some tatami mats when I get back home and change my sleeping arrangements around a bit. When I spot a shop selling small tatami mats, I know I need to have one. They're about 15cm square and beautifully made. As I'm walking through the streets, I suddenly notice an opening that leads to a small shrine. I stop off here for a quick look and buy a charm with a Koi on it.

In the evening, the rain eases off and I make a little detour to Fushimi Inari shrine. Although it's getting too dark to climb all the way up the mountain, all the buildings are lit up, and no-one else is here. I take a few photos at the bottom of the mountain, and am stopped from going any further up by a sign that warns me I might be attacked by wild boar.

## Tuesday

Overnight, there's been a big improvement in the weather, so I head out to Nara. It would seem that the whole world and his wife has had the same idea; the temples are insanely busy, and there are a few school outings in the mix just to complete the absolute carnage. *So much for getting around quietly.* I leave the station and jump on a bus that takes me into the centre of the park.

I get off the bus about halfway up so I can walk through and see the deer. They have the run of the town, pretty much, which means that if you're driving along and the deer want to sleep on the road, well, you're driving around them, or you're waiting. I take lots of photographs of deer that give precisely zero fucks. Most are tame enough to approach without problem, and I dish out a few head-pats. I find myself highly amused when one well-

meaning person decides to buy food for them from one of the vendors. The second the package is open, a spontaneous rugby match breaks out, and the unwitting tourist is the ball. She can't get rid of the crackers in her hands fast enough.

Walking through the underpass, the air is much cooler here, and it's interesting to see that the deer are well aware of this. A few have come down here to get out of the sun and have a little rest. It seems a bit strange to see them here, but I suppose to them, it's just another cave.

I start with Todai-ji, a temple that promises a giant statue of the Buddha, as well as a good 20 minute wait to get in. There are actually five very impressive statues here, Buddha is just the largest of the three biggest ones. It's a bit of a cliché to say it, but this is one of those situations where you really have to see something for yourself in order to believe it. It's very difficult to convey the sheer scale of the statues here with a few photographs. Thankfully, the temple staff have attempted to assist with this by offering up some scale pictures that you can photograph. Buddha's head is about as tall as I am. In the far corner, one of the large wooden pillars holding the place up has a big hole in it. As I understand it, if you can pass through the hole, then you'll achieve enlightenment in this lifetime. All the kids wait in line to take their turn, being in equal parts pushed and dragged through by the adults attending to them. I could probably make that, but I'm not going to wait around to find out. *If enlightenment comes, let it be a surprise.*

On my way back, I plan to stop at Uji - the birthplace of Japanese tea-drinking. However, I find myself dozing off in the train, and by the time the station comes up, I'm a little too comfy for it. It's not that far from Kyoto station, so I convince myself that I might have time to drop in on it some afternoon later in the week. Of course, I never do. When I get back to the house, the first thing I want is to turn on the air conditioner. As the vents open, a small roach that had been sleeping there drops straight out. In that moment, I think he's about as surprised by this as I am. Reaching for the spray bottle I bought from Muji, I give

him a quick blast and he stops pretty much instantly. *Nice. Now I have all the power here.* Now – I’m sure it’d be nicer to read if I said that I did something totally humane and Buddhist-like here. Letting small insects go free, showing respect for all life, walking through the world with birds and small rodents hanging off my outstretched arms like a Disney princess...but that’s not what happened. Through my actions, I brought more pain and suffering into this world – although admittedly, not for very long.

## Wednesday

Wednesday morning sees me drag myself into Kyoto station at an ungodly hour. I want to be in Hiroshima as early as possible, and that means a roughly two and a half hour ride from Kyoto. I have a banana and a Pocari Sweat for breakfast. If it is not the breakfast of champions, it is at least the breakfast of someone who doesn’t want to eat lunch yet. Pulling into the station, I get a great view over towards the baseball stadium, and make a note to buy myself a Hiroshima Carp t-shirt. I grab something else to eat when I arrive: There’s a McDonalds in the train station and I know that the PASMO card I have doesn’t work on the trams here (Yet. Coming soon, I’m told). There is – apparently – an IC card that will work here, but I think I’ll just break a ¥1000 note and get some fries.

There’s a place just outside the station to get the tram, and I jump on to go the few stops down to the A-Bomb Dome stop. There’s something that’s part of the controls of these trams that chirps and chatters away while the driver is moving. Perhaps it’s some sort of messaging system for the drivers? It’s not long before we’ve reached literal target zero – the three-way bridge that the Enola Gay was aiming for. I step off the tram and cross the road to find the A-Bomb Dome. It’s a skeleton, propped up now for safety reasons by beams and girders on the inside, but it gives a good idea of what it would’ve looked like the day after. There are a few volunteers who hang around this area. They talk to you



about the bomb, where they were, what their families did after, and what they thought of it all. Most were surprisingly diplomatic about the whole thing. One of the volunteers hands me a roof tile, scorched by 4000°C heat. It's a surreal feeling, holding something in your hand that has been present at one of the biggest moments in world history. The surface is like little balls of glass on a piece of sandpaper, and although I know that it's much safer than playing with rocks in the Chernobyl exclusion zone, I can't help but have that irrational feeling I'm doing something I *really* shouldn't.

There's something very humbling about this place. Although there's a lot you can say about Hiroshima, the things that really matter are hard to find words for. I wander down through the peace park, trying not to miss anything out. The clock just across the river from the Dome itself chimes only once every morning, at 8:15, the time the bomb dropped. I make a note that if I'm ever back this way again I need to book an overnight stay here so that I can hear the clock chime.

I make my way further towards the museum, pausing to look at the memorial to the mobilised students, before crossing the bridge. Here, there's a memorial to the children. There are many paper cranes here, all bright colours fluttering in the breeze. The cranes are – I'm told – inspired by a girl who got leukaemia and was trying to fold 1000 cranes in order to get a wish granted. Depending on who you believe, she either folded some 600-odd before dying, or she made it to 1300. It's about here that the schoolchildren start practising their English on me.

I've had kids walk past me and give their best "herro" or other simple stuff before. It's really quite endearing and I don't mind waving back and answering them. Here though, in the Peace Park, there are roaming groups of schoolkids, all around 10-12 years old, and they're desperate to learn English from any foreigner that moves. The first group is quite a novel experience. They come up to me very politely and ask if I don't mind answering a few of their questions. *Sure, I think. I have a few minutes, this seems like it's going to be cute.* They all go round and introduce them-

selves, and I do the same. They ask me where I'm from, about my pets, what kinds of foods I like here, and carefully note down my answers. They then thank me and wander off. This ends up being the first of about 5 groups, and although they're all very nice...by the end, they've taken quite a bit of my time and it's all wearing a bit thin. I've started making up what pets I have in order to keep things interesting. The final group comes over with their ojisan teacher in tow, and, after the usual grilling by the local Hiroshima Inquisition, I'm handed a small bag full of beautiful little origami animals the students have folded themselves. Out of all the things I've brought home from Japan, this little bag might be my favourite.

I take a few photos at the Pond out at the front of the museum, where a flame is kept burning, before going into the museum itself. There's a collection of the interesting, the informative, and the heartbreaking here. Plenty of little items where people's possessions have been melted by the blast, and plenty of photos of people who have, too. I spend some time here looking at the exhibits. Upstairs there are videos and various other, more interactive displays that take a step back from the individual and offer wider historical context and technical information.

When I'm done here, I buy a small porcelain ornament in the shape of an origami crane that takes my fancy, and head out the exit, keeping to the far edge of the park so that I don't have to deal with roaming gangs from Sensei's English Class. Here I meet a statue of Kannon, and then get to see the burial mound for a large number of the victims. It's quite sobering to be stood there.

Nearby, there's a peace bell, and I go to ring it. The log used to ring the bell is chained to the roof above the bell, and is deceptively well balanced. It takes no effort at all to move the log. As a result, I swing quite a bit harder than I was expecting to. The bell reverberates with an ear-splitting *DOOONNNG* that echoes clean across the park, and I can feel my face going red. I consider that a point well made... before moving very quickly away.

## Thursday

In the morning, the rain was falling in big fat blobs. *Good. Should be quiet, then.* I'd planned to go to Kinkaku-ji, Ginkaku-ji, and then *maybe* walk the Philosopher's path down to Nazen-ji to finish. Or take the bus, depending on how tired my feet are. I emerge from Kitaoji Station and wait for the bus. You can go from Kyoto Station directly, but there's only a couple of buses you can take, and I'm told it's quite a slow journey. Getting most of the way there by train is supposed to cut the time in half. Luckily there are a few other people that want the ride, so I make a point of allowing them on first so I can see what to do – you enter through the door in the middle of the bus, and exit at the front by the driver. I tap in using my PASMO card, and then tap out at the front when I get back off.

The walk up the road to the temple entrance tells me one thing quite directly – the rain isn't stopping anyone. As I'm stood in the line waiting to get in, I come to the conclusion that the rain might have made the crowding issue worse. Everyone wandering through here has their own umbrella, and most of them are Asian, which makes them shorter than me. All the points at the edges of their umbrellas hover dangerously around eye-level. I've never been more glad to be wearing glasses.

Kinkaku-ji, or the Golden Pavilion, is one of those photographs that everyone going to Japan ends up taking, and I'm no exception to that rule, snapping away from underneath my umbrella. I think the rain adds a certain artistic something, even if I am getting a little frustrated at having to bide my time in order to avoid the worst of the Chinese tourists, who practically shove you out of the way. I try to get plenty of photos that nobody else thought of, knowing full well that this place is so well photographed that actually managing that should be pretty much impossible by this point. At the gift shop, I buy myself a little glass pot with some gold leaf in it, as well as an "academic success" charm – which is actually a small but perfectly formed *randozeru* – and wander back down to the exit.

I catch the bus to Ginkaku-ji and watch out the window for the duration of the ride. The rain, which had been relatively steady while I was walking around Kinkaku-ji, now really goes for it, so much so that it gets hard to see what's going on outside. This forces everyone else back indoors, and by the time I arrive at Ginkaku-ji, I find that I share the place with about 3 other people, all of whom are already over the far end of the temple grounds. I quickly find myself a little space where the roof will shelter me just by a Zen sand garden. Well, I say sand, but it looks more like gravel after the rain has battered it. I sit and watch the world go by for a moment, wondering how they made that giant cone out of sand.

As the rain eases off, I start wandering round and am rewarded with some very good photos of the silver pavilion itself. There's a rock in one of the ponds where you have to throw a coin and if it lands on the rock, that's lucky. The sign says that men should throw using their left hand to make it harder. In my case, it makes it too hard, and I miss. *Oh, well. The temple has a few more pennies to help look after the place.* I move on. The moss garden here is one of the nicer ones I've seen, and although I should be snapping photos all over the place, I find myself so immersed in the place that I take hardly any. On the way out, though, I spot a cute little mushroom just sat there and I reach for my camera. That's all I need, I think.

At the gift shop, I manage to find some incense that I really like, so I get this along with a fridge magnet. Outside, there's a vending machine serving hot drinks and I decide to get myself a coffee. The rain has almost stopped, so I can just stand there with my cup and watch things happen for a bit. Out of the two locations, I think I much prefer Ginkaku-ji. Although Kinkaku-ji is the more impressive temple, Ginkaku-ji makes up for that in spades with the gardens around it. Out of the two, I know which one I'd rather go back to. Given the way the weather has been, I don't take any chances walking the Philosopher's Path. I can't help but feel I'll probably end up looking like a drowned rat if I do. Back on the bus for Nazen-ji it is.

By the time I reach Nazen-ji, the rain has stopped completely. *Figures*. I could have walked it if I wanted, although I'm kind-of glad I didn't. I think my feet have taken enough punishment for a while, they're screaming at me again. You can climb up inside the second gate that you come to here, the staircase inside goes up at about 50° though. The monks that used to look after this place must've had steel springs for legs. There are a few Zen gardens on the way up to the main temple itself. Each of them charges a separate admission fee, and each one is more expensive than most gardens I've been in, but I really like moss-and-sand Zen gardens, so I don't mind the cost at all. Each one is unique and incredibly well kept, so the money certainly appears to be going to the right things.

Around the back of the temple is an old aqueduct. I recognise it immediately from K-On! and take a few photos. On my way back down, I notice a small shop, and wanting a drink, I pop in. I come out with a small incense burner, in the shape of a kitten. Apart from being very cute, the smoke comes out of his ears. There's no way I'm not buying something that makes me laugh that much.

Later that afternoon, I make my way back to the Aeon Mall to grab a few supplies. I also wanted to get a chance to try again with the ojisan in the music shop. In a moment of inspiration yesterday evening, I grabbed some of the artists and albums I was interested in and put them on my phone so that I could just pull them up in a moment's notice and enlarge the text for him if needed. When I show him what I'm after, he knows exactly where to look, and before I know it, we've found three of my five wanted. CDs in Japan are quite expensive compared with back home – ¥2500–3000 for the average album, it seems. If I was living here, I'd pirate pretty much everything. Still cheaper than having it shipped over, but only just. I limit myself to just one – Tatsuro Yamashita's *Ride on Time*.

Around the side of the mall, I spot an amusingly named coffee/donut shop. They've obviously tried to capture that "Jack-in-the-Box" vibe – but they've gone with "Jack in the Donuts". Oh

dear. They might be the best donuts in the whole of Kyoto, the owners are obviously putting a lot of love in their products, etc. etc...but I think I'll give it a miss.

## Friday

There's only one thing left that I feel I must do before I leave Kyoto behind. I need to climb Mount Inari. Another one of those photos that everyone gets, the Fushimi-Inari shrine is home to over a thousand red *Torii*, and has been used quite a few times as a filming location. The weather looks a little on the threatening side as I go out, but by the time I'm at Inari station, the sun has burnt away the last of the clouds, leaving me with a humid but bright day. There are a lot of people here, I suppose just after lunch is peak mountain-climbing time. I spend a little time in the temple grounds, making sure to donate a little money to appease the Kitsune who would otherwise block my path, before starting up the mountain.

The climb isn't too hard, but it's one of those *apply constant pressure over time* situations that starts to wear you down in the end. Some of the recent storms have knocked down the odd tree here and there, and it's quite interesting to see. The people around me are all going at their own pace; I overtake some, only to be overtaken myself in turn. Usually by old people, too. Japan has some elite mountaineering old farts, it would seem. They're at every shrine or temple you visit, and they always go bounding on ahead of you. They're interesting to talk to, though. Most of them have kids or grandkids who've gone out into the wider world and therefore they're pretty confident with their English.

When I reach the Tea-houses near the top, I stop for a rest. There's a shop here selling orange fizz, and I buy myself a bottle. It's a little bit sheltered here, but you can look out between the trees and see all of central Kyoto beneath you. I take a few photos, and then have to make a decision. I do not know at this point exactly how close I am to the peak of Mt Inari, and I some-

how miss the signs that tell me. I can go off to my right, and the climb to the peak takes about 10 minutes going up at 35-40°, or I can go straight on and then bear right, which will take me all around the “crown” of the mountain at a fairly gentle incline of 10° and end up approaching the peak from the other side. I end up taking the longer walk, which, if I’d realised what the choices were, would never have taken. It’s a good walk, though. There are small shrines dotted along the walk, and I got to have it all to myself.

Finally, I reach the peak of Mt Inari. The temple here is an “involuntary open-air” situation – being on the top of a mountain means getting hit repeatedly by lightning, so after it burned down a few times, the will and the money to rebuild it was apparently gone. I pay my respects and look around for a bit, taking a few photos as I do. I then turn to the shop behind me. Here, the sign tells me, are the exclusive never-get-it-anywhere-else souvenirs of the shop at the top of Mt Inari. Well, I wonder about that, but I’m not in a rush to climb halfway down to find out. I buy myself a banner of the shrine itself, and also a cute fridge magnet. It has a picture of a happy little fox walking back down the hill through the *Torii*. When I reach the bottom of the mountain, I buy myself one of the little red torii as well, and then hop back on the train.

As my day comes to a close, I head back to the house. Near where I’m staying, there’s an amateur baseball field, and the floodlights are already on. I pause just outside the station for a moment. Around the floodlights, there are a handful of bats, wheeling around the lights, obviously catching insects that are too small for me to see from here. I’ve only been stood there for the briefest of moments when it feels like someone has shoved a white-hot needle into the back of my hand. I look down in horror at the massively oversized mosquito trying to deprive me of my precious bodily fluids, and swat it away. I start moving away, but obviously not fast enough; the little bastard nails me again on the upper arm. I pick up the pace even more, brushing my exposed arms furiously as I go, hoping the vicious little demon gives up,

or I squash it, before it can bite me again.

Back in the house, I fish around in my toiletries bag to find some bite cream and spend a few minutes applying it. It would appear that climbing Mt Inari earlier with all that humidity wore off all the repellent I put on. The bites will continue to itch for the next few days, and I spend the next 48 hours feeling slightly unwell. *The only good bug really is a dead bug.*

## Saturday

Saturday marks my last full day in Japan. I start the morning at about 8AM, and after coming out of the shower, carefully start to pack all of my stuff back up into my suitcase. Since this isn't a hotel room, I'm expected to do a few tasks for the cleaner before leaving. I take a few leftover perishables out of the fridge, and then bag up all the bins and put them in the entry-way, ready to go. This done, I make one last check of the place I've called home for the last week, and roll my suitcase out into the street.

The train back to Kyoto Station is quite quiet, by the time I'm lined up on the platform and waiting, it's about 10AM, so anyone going to work or school has already been and gone long before. I share my ride back with mostly housewives going shopping and old men, who...well, if they have a reason to be going anywhere, it escapes me for now. At Kyoto Station, I grab myself a banana and a Pocari Sweat. It's not overly warm, but this is fast becoming a tradition for me when on the Shinkansen.

The train pulls up, and I get on first. Because I'm carrying a heavy case with me, I stand by the adjacent door and wave the other passengers into the carriage first, so that I'm not in anyone's way. Luggage delivery services are great out here, but not when your flight leaves at 8AM tomorrow morning and you didn't send everything yesterday. I stow my cases and take my seat. As the train pulls out of Kyoto, I watch the city disappear into the distance.

By the time I reach Tokyo station, it's mid afternoon. I bump



my case around and catch the Yamanote line back to Hamamatsuchō station, before catching the Monorail out to Haneda airport. Here, I've booked an overnight stay in the airport hotel. Although these places are always on the expensive side, it's worth it to just roll out of bed and go through the airport tomorrow morning. I haul my case up on the hotel bed and pop it open. Anything I don't need after today can stay out of my case now; it'll all go in the bin to save weight tomorrow morning.

Time, like fate, catches up with all of us in the end. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't try to run from it for a bit. As a final act of defiance, I leave the hotel behind me and get back on the Monorail, determined to squeeze some last little thing out of this day. I stare out the window at the skyline as I go, the light slowly fading along with my remaining time. I have no plan, no set destination. All that remains is this burning determination *not* to sit in the (admittedly very nice looking) hotel restaurant for the next hour or so. There's plenty of time to not be in Japan when I get back home. I change over to the Yamanote line, and find myself jumping back off at Akihabara. Here, I suddenly realise that the only thing I ate today was a banana, so I grab myself a burger and hide out in the basement of the McDonalds near the station. By the time I get back out, the sky is dark, and all the lights have come on. I wander the shops and streets for a while, just trying to form a few memories that I can hold on to and keep inside myself a little longer. In the end, though, I can only accept the inevitable, and begrudgingly make my way back to the airport.

The international departures lounge at Haneda has some really nice shopping areas on the upper level. I spend an hour or so up here, finding a few last things to get as gifts for the family; a few kit-kats here, some Hello Kitty merch there. I pick up some leaflets with oddly phrased English that make me laugh. That done, I step out on to the observation platform, and stand in the cool night air for a while, just watching the planes. At ten PM or thereabouts, I finally surrender to tomorrow. I have to be awake at 5AM, so I should try to get to sleep at a reason-

able hour. I stash all the goodies I've bought in a now dangerously full suitcase, and get ready to hit the hay. The water in this airport is held in a giant wooden tank – there is a small, laminated card by the bathroom sink that tells me all the environmental and earthquake-resilience benefits of having such a thing, before telling me I might be able to detect a slightly different “woody” taste in the water here. To my surprise, when brushing my teeth, I actually do. As a whisky drinker, I find it to be a pleasant, slightly familiar taste, and start wondering what drink I might've paired it with, given the chance.

## Sunday

It's still dark outside when the alarm wakes me. I curse the thing for doing its job as I asked it to, drag myself out of bed and get myself ready to go. I arrive in the departures hall just as check-in opens for my flight. Again, there's that confusion with the bags – the website asks how many bags you want to put in the hold, and the app asks how many bags total. Or was it all the other way around? I ask the nice lady to sort it all out for me. *When will I ever learn? No. Fuck that. When will they fix their BS?* I pass through security and passport control, where they officially tag me as having left Japan. *Shikata ga nai.*

I move on and secure myself a very nice bottle of Japanese whisky in the duty-free section, as well as a carton of smokes for Dad. I have about an hour to kill, and I spend most of it walking around the shops, wishing I'd run off into the forest somewhere and hid in a cave so I didn't have to leave. Sadly, though, I do. I get a last bottle of Pocari Sweat from the vending machine at the gate, making sure to note down that there's ¥600 still on my PASMO. It should be valid for the next ten years, so I'll keep it around. Finally, we're called to board and it's with mixed feelings that I get on the plane, excited aSalways to fly, but sad to be leaving.

The plane pushes back and gets a priority taxi out to the run-

way. It's all over faster than I'd like. As the engines come up to full power, I turn to take a final – slightly watery – look at Tokyo as we climb into the sky and make for home.

## **Postscript / Monday**

*So, that's it. My first trip to Japan over, and we'll leave past me to take the long drag back home on my own. It's never too early to plan your next visit, and I had something pretty well outlined by the time my first in-flight meal arrived. Bat-flu aside, I've been back to Japan every single time I could afford it. I hope you've enjoyed coming along with me. I'm sure those of you walking with me down Memory Lane will have recognised some of the baka gaijin moments I had, echoed perhaps in your own travels or of those around you. I promise I've gotten better since then! I've catalogued most of the things I did and places I went to, but one of the things that's far harder to capture – and was a super important part of my time there – is just that almost Zen-like state of being. Having tried a few times now, I think I've caught some aspects of it, but perhaps the very core of it defies words altogether. At the very least I can say that it's one of those things where if you know, you know. I spent quite a bit of my time just being, and it seems to be good for the soul.*

*If you've never been, I really hope I'm extra motivation for you to go, that you won't have to wait too long for it, you won't have to jump through too many medical-related hoops and that on your first go you won't have to be as dumb as I was. I'm a huge convert to the belief that you should be willing to get just a little bit lost and confused when travelling: Many of the things that you'll find that way never appear or get headline attention in any travel guide book. When you're done, it's often some of the smallest and most unexpected things that leave you with the best memories. But all the same, it's important not to get too lost and confused. You still want to have a good time, right? I got heatstroke at one point. You really don't want that...*

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I'd taken an extra day off after my trip in order to get over the worst of the jet-lag that is inevitable with a large change of time-zone. I figured I'd be best off staying outside: Having some exposure to daylight should reset the internal clock faster. So, I used my time to do a little bit of general tidy-up on my life, pay my bills, and then catch the train into a nearby city to do some shopping.

When my train turned up on time, I was surprised. But, then the announcement came: the usual catering service on that route was "unavailable due to unforeseen circumstances". I smiled. Ah, home crap home, you never fail to disappoint me somehow. I really doubt this will make the evening news. Or warrant a proper apology.

The cicadas that had been so distracting on my first day were now sorely and desperately missed. I found I couldn't sleep properly for weeks afterwards unless I had cicadas on in the background. I needed to hear my little buzzing, chirping friends again. Even now, they're my go-to sound whenever I want to feel relaxed and comfy on a warm summer evening.

You very quickly get used to the way that people treat you out in Japan, and how easy many things are. It sneaks up on you, and then you get an odd reverse-culture shock as you step off the plane. Back home, normal human-human interactions that would be water off a duck's back at any other time suddenly become the most effort-y, unpleasant experiences that leave me wanting to tear someone else's head off and hurl it into traffic. It gets worse re-adjusting to this when returning from each subsequent trip, too.

And while we're on that subject – so is something else.

Allow me to preface by saying that I'm not usually so sentimental. I reserve it for immediate family and some very old and meaningful possessions that were gifted to me by those now long gone. I've never minded moving houses or changing jobs. My goodbyes are short and largely devoid of emotion. I've always seen leaving other countries as part of the normal process of going on holiday. But leaving Japan...That gets worse every

time. I don't mind telling you that the last night before catching the plane home is always an emotional one. It's not quite "tears before bedtime" yet, but over time it's been getting harder and harder to choke them back. It's not just about going back home, or being thrown back into the wage-cage with no prospect of escape for months. Of course, it is partly those things too, but most of it is something far deeper. There's a kind of "homesickness" to it that claws at your insides and never truly leaves you. You've left a part of yourself behind: the only way to be whole again is to go back to Japan and find it patiently waiting for you in the airport. I look forward to a day when I can get on the plane for the last time, knowing I'll never need to leave.

– *Anon*

# Conversations Between Outsiders

by /a/non

*For those who are undeniably smug and have trash taste of a more  
doggish inclination.*

## I

### Easy Talk in a Dead-End Town

From the bosom of a forest valley rose a hamlet, well placed along a trade route between kingdoms. The dusty, well-worn path pockmarked with hoof and footprints marked the town as a hub of respite and commerce amidst long, interconnected trade routes. At least, it seemed, it was a town of commerce. Now it was a ghost town, with nary a soul haunting its pathways, save one of its most recent visitors.

A strange man, with equally unusual features, walked cautiously towards the interior of the hamlet. He bore with him an odd cloak with sleeves and a hood along with trousers of a strange, stitched, blue pattern, topped off with a head of raven black hair and sharp, refined looking features. The town, to him, seemed to be of medieval make in terms of construction. But that would be impossible, there was no kind of historical settlement like this where he was from; not in driving distance let alone walking distance. Then again, he also didn't recognize any of the hills or mountain ranges in view. But that was also impossible,

it had been a mere trail walk, how could everything look so different?!

Surely, he thought, he just had to be lost somewhere, having taken a wrong turn at a fork or maybe dozed off with his attention somewhere and wandered off trail. The circumstances of the matter, however, begged to differ. The streets were not afield with busy families and workers moving to secure livelihoods for the future, as would be expected of such a recreational settlement. More accurately, the village was lifeless, a fact made more evident by the bodies sprawled haphazardly across the place.

Person or animal, all the bodies bore the same horrific fate. They were devoid of any fluid and withered to blackened skin and bone. Their last moments were agonizing ones if the contorted expressions were any indication. On each of them was a vicious bitemark on the neck created from pointed, inhuman teeth, though there were no blood splatters visible in any location, unnatural deaths to be sure.

Careful not to touch any bodies more than he had to, the man, Lawrence, took to scavenging them for anything useful. The most obvious (and most useful in the moment) prize he managed to scrounge was a sword off an armor wearing body, one that was still within its sheath. A genuine sword too, not a mere replica meant only for reenactment. It was what had to be genuine, high-quality steel. From being drawn at the wrong angle to getting stuck in a plank of wood when swung, it was sturdy piece.

Deciding the weapon would suit him better than its less-than-fortunate owner, Lawrence undid the belt clasp around the body's waist, clinching his nose against the fetid stench of death as he wretched his prize away. Despite the distraction of rustling metal plate and the crack of taut muscle and bone, Lawrence's spine twitched in instinctual worry. He could practically feel that a set of eyes were watching him.

Attaching the belt to his waist, preferring survival to respecting the dead, Lawrence looked about his surroundings, hoping to catch a glimpse of whatever, if anything, might be watching him. No such luck. Not spotting anything, he stood up with the

looted weapon at his side, ready to leave this graveyard to rot in his absence. As he began to leave, however, he heard something over the gusts of wind and creaky, ajar wooden doors. It was a voice, young sounding and desperate for an answer as it called out, "Hello? Is anyone there?" The source, it seemed, wafted on the breeze from a larger, two-story building at the end of the road, which seemed to lead directly to its front door.

It was totally a trap. He just *knew* it was going to be a trap. That, or whoever was still hiding there was going to accidentally gut him and leave him for whatever killed everyone else in this dead-end town. But it could still be some poor girl who just had a streak of luck to avoid whatever breezed through town.

Then again, by whatever grace or misfortune allowed him to get here, he might be better off playing along in the game of fate. At least until he figured out where he was.

With clinched teeth, and a less than enthused demeanor, the stranger slowly made his way towards the voice. With silent, rolling footsteps and a constant vigil, he kept a hand on the sheath at his side, wary that he was still being watched. At the front of the building, he peeked through the windows silently, attempting to get a better view of the darkened insides to no avail. Wooden shutters barred his vision and would not budge, even with force. The voice called out again, "Is someone there?" from within the building. Lacking any other options, Lawrence gritted his teeth as he was forced to use the front door practically blind to the layout inside. With a forceful shove, the door opened, though not without resistance the clatter of furniture belied a hurriedly constructed barricade.

Cracking open the door, Lawrence leaned into the cover of the door from the outside and called out, "Hello? Fellow human here. Please don't go about stabbing me because you think I'm someone else! And if you think that that's exactly what some sort of monster would say to gain trust, I don't know what to tell you to defeat that! And if you're a monster yourself I am armed and able to defend myself!" Confident that his warning would have the intended effect, at least, for a genuine call for help, he



pushed against the door further, finally making his way inside.

The inside was dark, nearly pitch black if not for the light now streaming in through the door. The building, it seemed, was some sort of bar or canteen. Tables and chairs that weren't dedicated to barricading the windows were in disarray, tipped over in an utter panic or strewn about the room. Several bodies littered the room, all drained in a similar manner to the rest. In the center, cradling another drained husk, was a healthy human woman. She was decidedly average, about Lawrence's age as well, with wavy, brown hair and tattered cloth garments with a splatter of blood about her clothes. She looked up from the body she was cradling, tears in her eyes.

Lawrence had to suppress the tugging pity in his chest with an astute eye, tirelessly searching for any discrepancies.

"Are...are you here to help us?" The girl asked.

"That, doesn't really have an easy answer." Lawrence answered after a brief pause. He took a step forward before catching himself from fully stepping into the room. Taking a moment to place a chair in the door's closing arc, he then allowed himself to venture somewhat into the dreary looking townhouse. "I...only just got here, what's going on?"

"Oh, it's terrible!" The girl sobbed, "A horrific demon came into town and murdered everyone! I only just barely managed to escape with my life...unlike...mother..." The girl cuddled the corpse more closely, burying her face in its brown, stringy hair before breaking down into tears.

"Well, hey, I think things are safe now. I mean I managed to get here without getting torn to shreds—"

"Please, you should come inside and hide with me." The girl spouted, interrupting Lawrence's reassurances, "There's no telling if the demon is still nearby."

There it was. There was the hook. "No, no I feel more comfortable talking in the light. Why don't you come outside and talk with me? We'll see it coming out in the open."

"Please, that thing could come back at any moment, you should take refuge in here with me, it can't get in here without

us noticing with the barricades at the windows.”

“No, I don’t think I will actually.” Lawrence responded flatly. He knew his next move, but God if the risk that came with it didn’t scare him. He turned on his heel, popping the sword out of its sheath with his thumb. “In that case I’m just gonna turn my back around and go outside to leave—” The pattering of quick footsteps on wood was a nice sign to tell him he was right.

Leaning down to potentially dodge whatever swipe could be coming for his head, Lawrence drew the sword with a flash, forcing the charging girl back with a snarl as his newfound blade created space. The girl retreated to the darkness and, within it, audibly began to change. He could hear the snapping of bone and the tearing of sinew as he barely made out the woman contorting inhumanly in the darkness, its features, clothes, and all changing by the second. Not bothering to bear witness to what was probably a horrifying transformation, Lawrence quickly dashed back to the door and took cover behind it, his sword pointing at whatever was inside.

What emerged from the darkness was a radically different entity from the woman that was just before him. A feminine form, the creature bore horns that jutted upwards from its skull and a tail with a spearhead like tip that gleamed in the darkness. The rags had changed to a more refined wardrobe, with cloth and fur draped off the shoulders towards the chest as a risqué display of regality. The only thing separating the thing from nudity and any sense of decency was a set of undergarments that covered the demoness’s bosom and womanhood. The thing’s skin was porcelain white, accented with various runic tattoos that was topped by a head of short, straight, black hair that covered a fair face. The mouth and eyes further belayed the thing’s inhumanity, with razor sharp teeth and sharp, slitted, red eyes. These various features, alongside the thing’s expression, betrayed a playful though predatory nature. Easy on the eyes, no doubt about it, but every aspect of the thing screamed of an otherworldly danger.

“I fuckin’ knew it.” Lawrence spat out, his paranoia justified.

Despite the...woman's failure to surprise Lawrence, she spoke with a mature, almost noble tone with underlying notes of haughtiness and amusement. "Well," she started, a hand cushioning her chin, "a clever one, for once. Not a knight or a hunter, but not some lowborn either. How ever did you manage to see past my disguise?"

"Are you looking for specific answers or are you just trying to eat up time to close the distance to me?" Lawrence replied, never taking his eyes off the creature.

"It depends, whichever one promises to be more...fun, I suppose." The predatory, almost psychopathic tone in which she spoke sent a chill up Lawrence's spine. It was as if he was face to face with the likes of John Gacy.

"Okay, well that's perfect then, because I've a game for you!" The demoness raised a brow and cocked her head in obvious interest.

"Oh? Do you now?"

"Yup, it's called 'Step into the sunshine!' You win prizes if you manage to go outside and do something! Like touching grass!" Without further ceremony, Lawrence slammed the door shut. Distancing himself from the building, he half expected the door to fly off the hinges from the demoness's fury at being scorned. When no such thing happened, he warily relaxed hoping that sunlight was, in fact, anathema to whatever the woman was. Yet, he could not shake the tingle in his spine. It felt that despite the literal barrier that existed between him and the woman, he was still just within reach...

In response, he flailed his sword behind him, striking air and not much else. He was alone in the ruined street, a quick glance around the rooftops and the alleys between houses confirmed as much. The complete silence complimenting the complete loneliness, Lawrence let his tension go with a huff through his nose. Either she was deathly allergic to sunlight, or she was toying with him without his knowledge, in which case he was screwed. Though he had to wonder if said toying would be due to some manner of magic, which had to be a given with how utterly me-

dieval everything was, or if it was due to some other physical quality of hers. The answer, of course, came face to face with him as he turned his body about and nearly ran into the demoness.

With a shocked yelp, he quickly jumped back as the woman stood unfazed by his flailing. "I believe I've won this game," She cooed, "stepping into the light and scaring you as such. Since you mentioned prizes, I can only assume that I've won at least one of them. So what is that I've won, stranger?" The last words were tipped with expectation and toxic annoyance.

"Oh, uh," Lawrence stumbled, "You..win, the..." With each passing moment, he could practically feel a noose tightening around his neck, almost imperceptible contortions on the demoness's face acting as an hourglass. "You win, the answer to how I managed to spot you out!"

"Oh joy~" The demoness mockingly cooed, "do go on." Befitting her nature, the demoness began to circle around Lawrence, tail bouncing in the air like a cat circling prey. Primal instinct warned Lawrence not to turn his back to the thing, less he invite his own death.

"Well," Lawrence started, shoring up his own confidence to boldly critique the woman, if only for his final, defiant moments. "For starters, the entire set up is, frankly, scuffed. Every living thing in this village is dead, for," he gave a shrug, "however long, and there just so happens to be a single survivor, in the biggest building, just sitting in the darkness. Who, mind you, is worried that whatever killed everyone might be coming back, and just so happens to cry at the right time to attract whatever schmuck comes across this place?"

"Which it did." The demoness retorted.

"True, but I hardly count but I'll get to that. Next, what gave you away was the form you decided to take." The demoness narrowed her eyes at the claim.

"Really now? How so?"

"For starters, you had it so that the neck had a blood splatter on it, when all of these other poor bastards got sucked dry. You expect me to believe you got nicked on something and man-

aged to escape? Then again with the tail who's to say what's what, I guess." Lawrence admitted, acknowledging the sharpened point. "The bigger thing that gave you away, however, was the hair." He motioned towards the woman's head of hair, who mirrored his attention. "Your act was implying that you were cradling your dead mother, or something like that. And while you got the color right, your hair was wavy with a slight curve to it while the hair on the body was straight. Granted it could have been a thing from a father or something, but I decided the more paranoid answer would work. Overall, a scuffed performance, though I imagine you were looking to try and fool any brave lawman types who showed up."

At this point, the demoness stopped in her tracks and turned to face Lawrence, the annoyance giving way to mere curiosity. "A...fair assessment. I'll freely admit I didn't have long to think of something when you showed up. And I suppose you have a fair point about the blood I decided to dab on, knowing things that the person wouldn't know. But you still have to admit it did work on attracting someone foolish enough to stick around."

"That's just an error on my part, don't think that I had any good intentions looking through the place. Besides, I only just got here! I hardly know which way is up at this point!"

"That much is obvious. I've never seen a man with hair or clothes like yours in any of these lands. From where do you hail, stranger in this land?"

Lawrence scoffed at the question. "I mean I'd say where, but something tells me it'll hardly matter considering how I sort of just wound up here." The demoness locked her eyes to Lawrence's, a half-lidded look showing contempt at his reply.

"Playing coy now, are we? Fine. I'll figure it out myself." Despite turning his head slightly away, Lawrence felt an odd sense of pressure to keep his focus locked on the woman's steely, unblinking gaze. "What family do you claim?"

"I'm not really on talking terms with my family."

"What lord do you swear allegiance to?"

"I don't have a lord."

“What occupation did you fulfill in your village?”

“I don’t...uh, live in a village.” The demoness was getting visibly upset at his answers, with fingers tensing and the corner of her lip turning upwards in frustration.

“Enough of this tripe. <sup>Where</sup> do you come from?” Her gaze was even more intense now, and Lawrence simply could not bring himself to bare against it.

“I’m, sorry.” Lawrence turned away, breaking eye contact with the woman. “Could you quit staring at me like that? It’s really distracting. Also, I already told you it probably doesn’t—” He stopped himself when he looked back to the demoness, who stood seemingly taken aback at him. “I’m sorry is there some weird thing I’m missing right now?”

“...Were you not under my spell this whole time?” The demoness asked.

“Ah fuck, magic’s a thing here?!” Lawrence replied. The demoness stood stupefied before him, shocked and incredulous at the revelation Lawrence had apparently bestowed upon her.

“Is a thing here—” The demoness stopped herself, regaining her composure as she idly chuckled at the question. Lawrence couldn’t help but chuckle himself at the ridiculousness of the exchange.

“I’m serious!” He blurted out. “I don’t know word one of where I am, and to make matters worse I’m finding out magic exists wherever it is I am!”

“‘Does magic exist.’” The demoness mockingly repeated. She let out a haughty guffaw, seemingly satisfied with whatever conclusion she’s reached. “I see now. You’re just playing the fool to have fun at my expense. Well, not for long, anyways.” Before Lawrence could ask what she meant, her tail whipped into the ground, a silver gleam sending a cloud of dust and dirt into Lawrence’s face, blinding him.

“Ah! Fuck, man!” Lawrence cried out, dirt in his eye. As he worked to rub the distracting particles of earth away, the demoness took advantage of her diversion to grapple his arms; one in a preternatural death grip and the other wrapped up by her

tail like a boa constrictor. The bladed tip of the tail glinted in the corner of his eye as the demoness traced a claw-like nail down his jaw line, the path like a thin singe mark upon his skin. With a firm grip, the demoness forced his gaze to meet hers as her fingers cupped his chin.

Her gaze was sharp and menacing, with fires of excitement burning behind unnatural irises. And yet, despite the steely gaze of a predator, there lurked something else that slowly grew in volume, dampening the woman's blazing confidence.

"I don't know who you are, 'stranger,' but you chose the wrong demoness to slight with your poor attempt at feigned ignorance. When I release you from whatever sad life led you to this moment, you may rest knowing that I shall be having the last laugh from your petty...little jest..." The demoness paused in what was meant to be her final send off to Lawrence before she killed him. Her gaze shifted rapidly from minor confusion to sheer terror within seconds, a concerning detail to say the least.

"What?" Lawrence asked, dumbstruck for anything else to ask. The demoness roughly pushed him away, releasing her grip on his arms. The demoness took a low, bent stance, as she distanced herself from Lawrence, fully alert and ready to strike with snake-like speed.

"You...what the hell are you?" The demoness asked.

Once again without any other recourse, Lawrence repeated his question. "What? Excuse me?"

"You can't be human, not anymore anyways. Your mana's practically gone, but you can't be undead. You've still color to you skin and you're still warm. There's no way you're a demon either, so I'll ask you again. What the hell are you?"

It certainly didn't sound good, whatever the problem was. Either way, it seemed that things were escalating and needed to be brought back down to some level of civility. "I'm...Lawrence." He answered, still not knowing what else to say to calm down the situation. "Look, I think we've both gotten off on the completely wrong foot. How about we talk about things over a bi—" Lawrence caught himself from making any unintended double

entendres that would potentially make him sound like a platter. "...a drink of...over some food or water like regular people?"

"Gh, you've got some nerve, equating yourself to a person." The demoness retorted. "You've hardly more mana than any of the poor fools I've sucked dry around here. You're practically a walking corpse."

"Well, I'm still walking and breathing and sweating, so I can't be dead. And, like you said I can't be a demon so I must be a human, though, granted!" Lawrence exclaimed, pointing a finger upwards to make his point, "I don't have any loyalties to whoever these people were! In regard to that...mana thing, maybe where I come from might provide some explanation for that. Would you at least be willing to chat with me about where I am in exchange for telling you where I come from?" The demoness relaxed somewhat, and the look of terror softened into mere apprehension and suspicion with a raised brow. "Please?" Lawrence pleaded.

"...Fine." The demoness relented. Lawrence couldn't help himself but to smile at the answer.

It's always the please that works.

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While the townhouse's atmosphere was more than slightly dreary, mostly due to the assortment of bodies and the general mess within, it still served well enough as an eatery. Though it took some cleaning up, namely fixing up a table and chair to sit at and clearing away barricades for proper mood lighting, the place still made for an excellent forum of easy conversation. Sitting down to talk, drink, and eat stale bread (though Lawrence's appetite was more or less absent in such an abattoir) Lawrence told the demoness all he could about where he came from. From the wonderous nature of his home to his on-the-spot moment of hiking which lead him to this strange new land, he told her everything he could think of that might interest her.

The demoness, though apprehensive and tense during the



beginning of the conversation, eventually warmed up as the conversation continued. From leaning back in her chair to make any distance she could, to leaning in and even resting her head seductively against her hand, she eventually divulged an interest that was growing by the minute. For every bit of information Lawrence shared, the demoness traded her own information about the strange new world he found himself in. Between the existence of elves, undead, dwarves (mountain ones, not the genetic anomaly ones) and of the general fantastical layout of the land, Lawrence felt himself similarly enthralled in this world as she was his. She even traded supposedly vaunted details of her own "home." She spoke of a plane of darkness and fire, clad in stone towers whose shadows towered above all as pits of fire and brimstone burned eternally, sustaining a chorus of the screams of the damned.

A bit like Los Angeles, as far as Lawrence was concerned.

"What a utopia it sounds like," The demoness declared. "While magic doesn't exist, the mere fact that 'technology' allows even peasantry to benefit from warming in their homes, and that the royalty can reside in magnificent pillars of glass, practically a fairy tale! The uses of this technology you speak of sounds like a tale that a peasant revolt would spread, but if only they had their way of things."

"Oh you got that right. Though maybe not specifically peasants." Lawrence concurred, thinking of his time back in the university. "Sadly, despite all those luxuries, it ain't all cracked up as you think it is. We've got the same corrupt assholes in charge at home as the nobles you described that reside in this world."

"Certainly, but at least you can overthrow them, as you so claim with everyone being armed."

"Eh," Lawrence dismissed, "Most people didn't want to anyways, no matter how ludicrous things got with crazies being in charge."

"It can't be all that bad, whatever kind of crazy do you refer to?"

"The kind of crazy that would lob off their own genitals and

claim they were women, and if you didn't agree with them they'd ruin your life, take your livelihood and your children to brain-wash, and a bunch of other horrid things."

"Oh!" The demoness exclaimed, the negative side quickly coming to light. "Oh...I assume that even with this 'technology' of yours, it wasn't a...perfect process, shall we say?"

"If you mean like something you could pull off, hell no."

"Why that sounds like an utter headache to have to deal with."

"Oh yeah, it's a migraine." Lawrence agreed, a new topic popping into his mind. "Hey, on the topic, I'm curious about something actually. Mind if I ask you a more personal question?"

"Go ahead~." The demoness playfully agreed.

"I get you're like a shapeshifter and all that but, are you actually like this or are you just catfishing me?" The demoness stared blankly in response.

"What?"

"Ach, sorry, slang." Lawrence corrected. "I mean, is this like," he motioned towards the demoness, "your true form? You're not actually a man and this is a disguise or anything like that?"

"Oh? Why do ask?" The demoness, with a preternatural speed, shook its head from side to side as its face took on a more masculine look, emulating one of the nearby bodies. "You wouldn't happen to be more comfortable or, god help you, attracted to your own, would you?"

"No!" Lawrence loudly denied, having not expected the response. The demoness let out a hearty chuckle at her own accusation.

"It'd be a crime you know, fornicating with one of your own."

"No. God no. I'm just asking since it'd be awkward to get along with the wrong impression. Beer with a pal versus wine with a lady and all that."

The demoness gave a playful little chuckle, before altering her face back to its usual, feminine charm. "How very refined of you. Yes, it is. As you can surmise, I am quite adept with shapeshifting and transmutation. A bit of my own specialty, compared to many, many others."

“Ah. And that includes clothes?”

“Yes.”

“So, you’re like a succubus or something like that?” The horrifically sour glare he received in response told him what he needed to know. He backed down in his seat, turning away at his social faux pas. “Alright, sorry. I didn’t mean anything insulting if it was a slur or something like that. I hardly know where I am beyond some other plane of existence, this stuff’s still fresh and unknown to me.” The demoness let out a sigh from the apology, small twitches in her body dissipating any annoyance that might have sparked from the comment.

“It’s fine.” The demoness reassured him. “You don’t know anything about this plane, let alone the kind of harlots they are, and you’re far more accommodating than anyone else I’ve met. Though take heed of my advice, you’d do well to pick your words more carefully in the future. Just as it was traversing this ‘mine-field’ as you described it in your plane, so it is here with nobility, as they are not likely to be as forgiving as I. Take it from one who has mingled with them time and time again.”

“I’ll...keep it in mind.” Lawrence answered.

“Good~.” The demoness quipped, regaining whatever traces of her smug visage had slipped. “Now, I am curious about those horseless carriages you talked about, and those little, metal things that attract to the opposite and not their own—” The demoness stopped, her sultry demeanor dropping for an alerted scowl. She shifted her focus elsewhere, to some unknown thing or object that might have been nearby.

“Is something wrong?” Lawrence asked. The demoness glanced back to him, before pushing away from the table they had been sitting at. She shifted back to sultry demeanor with a small smile forming as she took her leave.

“I’d love to stay and continue our little chatter here, but there are other matters that demand my attention. I’d recommend taking whatever you wish from this place and leaving. Quickly. You wouldn’t want to be caught flat-footed less you find irons about your wrists.” Lawrence shifted in his seat, unsure what to

make of the development. She obviously sensed something, but how close was it? How much time did he have?

“And Lawrence?” The demoness called from the door. “For what it’s worth, I thoroughly enjoyed our little conversation of where you came from. It made for a nice change in pace to the usual manipulation that I’m so used to. If we ever run into one another again I’d love to pick up where we left off-.” With a final blown kiss, and a wink, the demoness stepped outside, the flapping of wings signaling her departure.

“Didn’t even wait for me say goodbye.” Lawrence mumbled. “Wait she didn’t even give me a name!” Standing up from the table, Lawrence stumbled over rubble and bodies towards the door, hoping to catch her in time. “Hey, I didn’t get your name!” He called out, but it was no use. The demoness was already gone. It was a shame, he thought. He had hoped for a name to the face, especially one as alluring as hers.

Such as it was, such people come and go in life, as Lawrence well knew. At the very least, at least he figured out that he wasn’t back home, and it was doubtful he’d be able to get back.

Taking the demon’s advice to heart, Lawrence eventually left the dead husk of the town behind; every nook and cranny investigated for valuables, and a sack of goods and sundries over his shoulder in a burlap sack.

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“Halt there!” A gruff voice called out. Lawrence paused in his tracks, holding his hands in the air, nearly reaching the thick forest canopy. “You! Drop the sack and turn around!” Complying, Lawrence released his bag of loot and turned about, not knowing what to expect in the suffocatingly thick forest.

Behind him on the path, hidden in the thicket, emerged a squad of several armored men, their leader being an older man with short, grey hair and an eye patch. All bore the heraldry of some unknown lord, kingdom, or organization, the oldest of them being the regalest with various decorations and marks

upon his armor of gold and silver that glittered in the dying light of the day. Before Lawrence could begin to speak, he was immediately assaulted by the oldest marching towards him and barking question after question in his face that he barely had time to answer.

“Who are you?”

“Lawren—”

“Where do you come from?”

“I don’t think it’ll really—”

“What is your strange looking clothes and your hair?”

“Could you please let me speak—”

“You just came from Grenwald, I know what remains of the place! What’s happened, what did you do?!”

Such was the barrage that he couldn’t get a word in edge wise. For every accusation that was hurled at him, he could scarcely explain his position. Hoping to escape the incessant barrage of blame and judgment, Lawrence tried his damndest to break eye contact to look anywhere else beyond the old man interrogating him, his mind blocking out the screaming. The man’s coterie were all similarly gruff looking men, though much younger than the elder blasting Lawrence. All were either blonde or brunette, no black hair at all. And, sadly, any hope of support from any of them was a forlorn hope, as all wore stern looks as they looked in his direction, bordering on contempt.

As forlorn as hope was amongst his “fellow” man, however, hope still lie in other, unforeseen places.

Quietly and decisively, a familiar, spear-like tail whipped from the canopy, impaling one of the men in the neck and hauling him upwards and out of sight, despite his brief struggle. Then, an elongated arm bearing wicked black claws reached downwards towards another, digging nails into flesh and dragging another gurgling upwards. All that remained was one last alerted soldier, desperately looking upwards in panic for where his comrades might have gone. The older man, still focused on Lawrence, continued his onslaught, and forced Lawrence’s vision back to him with a mailed hand.

Still ignoring the elder's condemnations, something about the mark of witchery and demon magic, Lawrence could only catch a glimpse of the last soldier being dragged upwards into the canopy like his compatriots. Shortly thereafter, the forest echoed with a sickening crack as some poor fate befell the unlucky soldier. The elder's attention, like the bone seconds before, finally snapped elsewhere, leaving Lawrence to his own thoughts.

The elder looked up to the canopy, a great mace drawn as his hand carried some strange symbol attached to what was some sort of rosary. Slowly he turned, keeping ever vigilant as to the threat that awaited him. He did not need to wait overly long.

From the canopy came the tail again, slick with blood and whipping directly towards the elder soldier. With a swing of his mace, he deflected the whipping appendage and, with his free hand, grabbed hold of the wicked thing. With a great huff and heave, the tail's owner came crashing through the thicket, through branches and leaves, to the ground and laid out in a sprawl.

The demoness, taloned hands clad in blood, quickly recovered her stance with a grunt, bracing her tail above her as she did with Lawrence earlier. Replacing her haughty attitude with animalistic fury, she quickly lunged back at the elder, her tail spearheading the advance as she bore her claws. Her tail quickly deflected by the mace, she took to trying to claw at the elder's face like a tiger. While splashes of blood flew, the elder seemed undeterred as he brought his fist back up to roughly push the clawing woman away from him. Laid out again, the demoness tried to recover, only to freeze in her tracks as the old soldier shouted at the top of his lungs.

"MIRIEL, WRETCHED SHIFTER AND SEDUCER OF MAN, HALT! TAKE NOT ONE FURTHER STEP YE SPEAKER OF LIES!"

The demoness, Miriel, stood in place as the elder bellowed his command. Though struggle contoured her face, she seemed unable to move as the soldier advanced towards her, mace in hand.

Snapping out of his shock, Lawrence moved before think-

ing, drawing his sword to...what exactly? Could he even take this guy on in a fight? His question was answered quickly as the soldier snapped his bloodied face back towards him and held up rosary laden hand towards Lawrence. With a quick motion of the fingers and a chant of some unheard sentence, Lawrence stopped with a flinch, freezing in place as the soldier glared daggers at him. "I'll deal with you after I deal with the whore once and for all." The soldier growled. The soldier turned his back to Lawrence, and began to approach Miriel, who bore sharpened teeth like a cornered animal. Lawrence, awkwardly recovering from his shock, slowly lowered his arms from their guarded position and looked back towards the man who had simply left him alone.

"You think you've won then?!" Miriel exclaimed. "I'm not the only one you know. There are so many others who'll be more than happy to move in once I'm gone!"

"But the world will be rid of one less monster terrorizing good people." The soldier replied.

"Thinking you'll be better off?! You need me more than you know captain. Once I'm gone, you'll have to contend with much more of those vampiric harlots who'll want to claim my stake!"

"I'll deal with it as I have to. At least here I can correct one mistake." The soldier raised his mace to his head, holding it in front of him in reverence. "In the name of blessed Hyra, for the good of Threnfollow, I condemn thee to—" The prayer was interrupted with a THUNK as Lawrence's blade found itself embedded into the soldier's head, splitting his skull open. With nary a sound but a raspy breath, the soldier faltered, his legs giving out as he dropped the mace to the ground. Miriel, seemingly free of whatever restrained her, quickly pounced upon the now dying man. Claws digging into and crushing steel, her mouth contorted and distended into a savage, worm-like maw full of razor-sharp teeth that quickly clamped down on the soldier's exposed neck.

The soldier's healthy, flushed skin began to blacken as he started to shrivel up like a sundried raisin. Within seconds, he

was another dead husk left out in the forest, devoid of life. Miriel detached from him with a satisfied sigh before staring down on the broken body in front of her. “Oh captain~” she cooed, “thank you for bestowing me with one last meal for old time’s sake. Even if it meant providing it yourself.” Tossing the body to the side, she raised up her arms to the air with her eyes closed in victory, a throaty chuckle rising into a cacophonous roar of laughter as she experienced the euphoria of what was likely a major personal victory. Lawrence could only stare at the scene before him, mortified at the events that had taken place and of its aftermath.

What had he just done?! He could feel his heart beating in his throat, his stomach floating like a balloon. Actually, scratch that, it wasn’t his heart in his throat, it was something else.

Miriel calmed down from her excitement and looked back at the scene before her, seemingly noticing Lawrence in the moment. “Ah! I almost forgot you were there Lawrence.” Lawrence could only keep staring, mouth a gape as Miriel continued in her self-indulgence. “I hadn’t thought that we’d be seeing each other again so soon. So, immune to more magics than just charms huh? To think that even magical force doesn’t affect you. You’ve quite the boon y’know, wizards would kill for that sort of protection...” She left behind the body and sauntered up to Lawrence, frozen in shock. “Is there something you mean to say? A question or a topic you’d wish to discuss?” Lawrence could only stare back in response. That ireful look came to her face again, obviously indignant at the lack of a response.

“Well?” She questioned. “Spit it out!” Lawrence’s body could only oblige. With a sudden gag, Lawrence ran away from the scene to the side of the road before falling to his knees. With a tremendous heave, he hurled a ball of his previous meal to the ground, followed by a small, steady stream of bile as he struggled to process that he had just murdered someone in cold blood. Certainly, watching someone get drained to a raisin was a horrid thing to bear witness to, but it was something else to feel the impact of a sword hitting a man’s skull, or to see blood spatters on his arms, or the smell of soiled undergarments...



Reminded again of the sensation, Lawrence redoubled in his vomiting as, Miriel, stood idly by, disgusted at the display before her. When, finally, Lawrence finished evacuating his guts, several spits required to clear the remnants from his mouth, he turned his head to Miriel with ragged breath. "Gah, sorry," he muttered, wiping his mouth, "I've never uh. Hmph humph. Did something like that to, to anyone. It's...it's not great." Picking himself back up, he turned back fully to the demoness. "Liveleak helps but...ugh."

"Well," the demoness started, awkwardly trying to keep the ice broken. "It's something that happens to humans the first time around. It's the ones that start early, or feel nothing from it, that you have to look for, I've noticed."

"I figured. Anyway..." Lawrence spit out another bit of vomit from his mouth, prepared to move on from the subject, "that was kind of you."

"Oh? Draining the very life from a man is something you consider kind?"

Lawrence shook his head. "No, no. The fact you helped out. I think it's kind of needed with folk like us, honestly." Miriel raised a brow in response. "Well, strangers, I mean. Strangers to lands like us need to stick together, help each other out!"

"What, you think I..." The demon tilted her head upwards and let out a haughty laugh, her amusement echoing through the forest. "How ludicrous! You might be the most unique man I've met in this land Lawrence, but you're still just another human I couldn't care less about living or dying."

A bit rude, Lawrence thought. "Then why'd you bother intervening if I wasn't so important?" He countered.

"Because!" She shot back. "Your situation just so happened to play into my advantage. These men just so happened to be a problem I was dealing with, and now, I have!" She motioned around to the scene she had created, and more specifically to the body she had discarded.

"So what, you're just going to leave now that your problem is dealt with?"

“Why yes, I am.” Miriel responded matter of factly.

“Not even to shoot the shit a little bit?”

“Is there a problem with me keeping to my own schedule?”

The demoness accused. Clearly a shit test.

“No,” Lawrence answered, wary of his words, “no problem at all. By all means you can leave to wherever, whenever. I’m not gonna stop you.” A toothy smile.

“That’s what I thought.” The demoness turned about to leave, only for Lawrence to spring his trap.

“Just remember that you owe me a favor!” Hiding a smirk, Lawrence watched with satisfaction as Miriel stopped in her tracks. She turned her head about, her smug looked tainted with the faintest glare as she stared back towards him.

“..Whatever do you mean to imply by that?” She asked, her tone low and almost murderous.

“I mean, if you didn’t mean to save me then clearly you killed these men for yourself, right?”

“Go on.”

“Then, since you got caught out and all by that old guy, whom I imagine you’ve had quite a history with—”

“Get to your point.” Miriel snapped.

“Because I saved you from getting your head smashed in, you owe me one.” Lawrence quickly finished. “Granted I don’t have any problems at the moment, I...uh, just kind of want to bust your balls a little bit. Tease you a little bit y’know? Have a little fun, take the piss out of it, that sort of thing.” Miriel remained silent for a moment, before turning her head away, in what was most definitely a tactic to hide any displeasure she had at the claim.

“...So it would seem.” She flatly answered. “You have me there Lawrence, and I will keep it in mind in the future.” With the crunching of cartilage, a pair of batlike wings sprouted from the demoness’ back. She was about to leave again and was obviously dead set on it.

“Alright, well. That’s fine.” Lawrence conceded. “I hope, at least, to be able to see you again Miriel.” A brief pause.

The response was swift, immediate, and terrifying.

Before he could blink, Lawrence found Miriel's hand wrapped about his throat and forcing him to the ground and on his knees. Her grip tightened, cutting off his ability to breath. Left with no option, Lawrence clutched at his attacker's arm as he struggled to not lose consciousness. Her gaze drilled into his very being as she stared into his eyes with murderous intent.

"Don't you *dare* repeat that name." She snarled, her outlook having changed to utter savagery. "I have labored long to ensure that my name was forgotten by mortal kind. I have burnt thousands of your years in knowledge to ash, utterly destroyed the lives of countless men and women, and instigated entire social upheavals to see the orders that knew about it annihilated. Do not think that I will hesitate for a second to flay you alive should you happen to merely utter that name to the thin air." She tightened her grip, practically cutting off the flow of Lawrence's blood to his brain. "Am I understood?" On the verge of blacking out, Lawrence nodded, at least understanding the gravity of the situation.

"Good." Miriel promptly released him from her grasp, leaving him to gasp for the air that was denied to him. "I will not be having this conversation with you again."

"Fine," Lawrence coughed out, "fine. That's fair. Didn't know it meant that much to you." Miriel, seemingly satisfied with her little demonstration, prepared herself to leave once again. "Hey," Lawrence rasped out, trying to get Miriel's attention, "for what it's worth, I apologize Miri. I didn't realize that the true name clause was a thing with your kind." Miri quickly turned about, Lawrence's new nick name for her having gotten her attention once again. "Nicknames are still fair game, aren't they?"

"You are pushing the limits of my tolerance, fellow stranger. You would do well to remember that advice I gave you." Without a further word, Miri took off with a flap of her wings. The snapping of branches and twigs (and the splatter of the bodies that were previously hidden up in the canopy impacting with the ground) postmarked her departure. Left once again to his own

devices, Lawrence saw no other course than to scavenge the bodies for whatever valuables they had before setting off.

In this strange new world, he had been given a most colorful welcome, and a nagging question that ate at him as he walked along the road, to the nearest town he could find. A question he sadly would not be able to answer on his own.

## II

### **Speaking Easy on Local Drama (and Deadbeats)**

DONG, DONG, DONG.

The town bell rang out, marking the impending evening curfew hours, a period where only vagrants, cutpurses, and other nefarious creatures still roamed the streets.

“Alright everyone, that’s the evening bell. Finish up your drinks and get your lanterns ready. It’s closing call.” There was a collective groan between the patrons that were still left in the bar interior. No one had bothered to drink outside in the patio tonight, it was just too chilly out. “Ay, no groaning, it’s not my decision to make. Believe me, none of us want Mr. Tarrant to wake up from his nap to have to deal with anyone who disagrees with it. But I tell you, I’ll see what I can do to have our hours extended.” One by one, the patrons left their respective coinage on their tables and filed out into the night, their thirst for alcohol begrudgingly sated. No one was left inside the bar but Lawrence and the completely empty mugs and glasses on the tables.

Lawrence let out a sigh and adjusted the cap on his head, relieved of customer expectations. Despite the lack of prying eyes, however there was still Tarrant’s strict expectations to deal with. There was cleaning the bar, ensuring that stocks would be ready for tomorrow, and, of course, counting money and ensuring not a single coin of it went missing. Little by little he was clawing his way out, but there was still tonight to get through. One thing at

a time.

It had been a mercifully quiet evening, and Tarrant had gone to sleep an hour before, leaving Lawrence to manage everything. He turned down how much the lanterns burned to a dim light; it was enough to see what he was doing, and to put on a front that the place was closed for the evening. He quickly set about cleaning the establishment, wiping down the bar with a rag and moving to clear mugs and glasses away to be cleaned later. “No sticky spots!” Tarrant had scolded. “This establishment is a place of refinement for the appreciation of fine liquor, not some hovel for lowborn to act as swine.” As if.

He honestly preferred working alone like this. Though it left him alone to clean up everything, it gave him a semblance of liberty that he so desperately craved. The façade of running and managing his own little place in a medieval city. Though, granted, there wasn’t much he could talk about with customers. Listening to the gossip and drama of the city and surrounding lands did make for decent entertainment, at least. There was all the buzz about that recent invasion or something about how one count was attacking another, it was all a blur, really.

As he set about wiping down the bar, Lawrence spotted a dark silhouette against one of the windows out of the corner of his eye. The silhouette was of a man, with bushy hair and a hunched over frame that stalked and towards the side of the building.

Towards where the side door was, which lead directly into the backroom storage.

“Son of a bitch,” Lawrence muttered. It was Chauncy again, the vagrant that had been the bane of his existence ever since he started here. An utter nuisance, he was a complete alcoholic who seemed to constantly scheme at getting his thirst for booze satisfied however he could. Between harassing customers and begging right next to the bar, he had been a thorn in Tarrant’s side and, consequently, Lawrence’s as he was inevitably assigned to deal with him. Yet even by driving him away by daylight, he’d only got worse over time. Now he couldn’t even let him just pass by without paying him mind, especially at night. The last time it

happened he walked directly into storage and drank himself into a stupor, right in the middle of it. Though the door had a lock on it now, it wouldn't be a surprise if he decided to try and break in.

The worthless guards didn't bother helping since they had apparently thought the most moral option was to just let himself drink into oblivion. They failed to understand that was money they expected to be given away, and money that specifically came out of Lawrence's pocket. Damnably altruism. Of course it was the same here as it was back at home.

At least they had the decency to not care when he took matters into his own hands, or more specifically an axe handle, to drive him off. Not quite as dangerous as the sword, but it was more legally acceptable to scare someone with a club than with sharpened steel.

Taking his trusty baseball bat adjacent with him, Lawrence quietly stalked to storage with a lantern in hand, ready to repel the repugnant booze raider. He worked quickly to unlock the side door and stepped into the darkened alley. Chauncy was immediately to his left, sitting slumped against the wall, naturally. All that was left was confrontation.

"OY!" Lawrence growled, tapping the axe handle against the door frame. "How many times do I have to go over this with you, you booze hound? You aren't going to stink up the place with your vagrancy, and you're sure as hell not going to waltz in whenever you please to drink yourself stupid. Beat it, before I beat you!" Chauncy did not respond with his typical muttering and slurred speech and didn't stumble off when the threat was issued, as was the routine. More disconcertingly, he simply tilted his head slowly over and looked at Lawrence out of the corner of his eye before looking away. Afterwards, he sat unmoving in his position, practically a challenge.

Despite the lack of action, Lawrence took a step back from the scene, put off by the lack of a response. Something was wrong, something horribly wrong. He's never been like this, every single hair on his body was standing on end. Still, what could that drunk even do? Lawrence still had the handle, as good a bat

as any, and he should be covered legally, if what Tarrant told him was true about property and driving folk off. And hey, if he fought back, he was perfectly fine to deal with it as he saw fit! His grip tightened on the handle as he stepped forward.

Between losing on his salary and having to beat off a drunk, he preferred the latter.

He raised the handle upwards, delaying his swing for a moment to wait for a reaction, before bringing it down as a hammer of order. Mid-swing, Lawrence noticed the gleam of steel emerge from one of Chauncy's hands as it was thrust towards him. Aborting his swing, Lawrence awkwardly brought the handle back upwards to deflect the blade going for his belly. With deceptive speed, Chauncy stood up and grabbed Lawrence by the cuff of his shirt, bringing him face to face with the vagrant's unusually sharp gaze. For a moment, the two locked eyes with one another, each trying to intimidate the other. So this was the bastard's plan, Lawrence thought, then fine.

Dropping the lantern, Lawrence brought his own hand up to cup the vagrant's skull, before shoving his thumb in his eye socket. With a startlingly high-pitched grunt, Chauncy released Lawrence and shoved him away with fierce strength. Recovering his footing, Lawrence thought nothing but to end the fight, now that Chauncy was off balance. Chauncy seemed surprisingly brutal when he seemed sober, a strength he couldn't allow to regain its bearing. When Chauncy made a wild swing with his knife, Lawrence was quick to punish him, swinging his handle to strike at the knife hand to get Chauncy to it. With a dull clink, Chauncy's arm went wide across his body as the handle made impact with it. The knife, shockingly, was still firmly in his grip. Hoping to pin Chauncy with his back turned to him, Lawrence moved to smash his hand against the wall, hoping thusly to disarm him and to teach him manners.

Grabbing his wrist, Lawrence noticed, with horror, that Chauncy's wrist was not as thick as he remembered it to be. In fact, it seemed as if his arm had *ended* with the knife, as if grafted upon a stump! Repulsed by the visualization, Lawrence thought

to bring the bat about to strike Chauncy across the head with a backswing, hoping the shock would be enough to end the fight. But as he brought it around to swing, he spotted another gleam in the darkness, hurtling straight towards his head.

Jerking his head back, he flinched as he felt the handle shatter into splinters in his hand, something metallic impacting against the stone wall as he made distance from the beggar. He looked to the remains of his weapon, now utterly destroyed, as he looked back to Chauncy in fear. Now, not only did Chauncy have the knife for his hand, but now something else lurked in the darkness with him, a spearhead like appendage that trailed downwards behind him like a snake. Of course it wasn't Chauncy, of course there was something wrong about all of this!

Slowly, in the brief pause of the conflict, Lawrence debated between trying to run and standing his ground and drawing his sword. He couldn't hear anyone coming down the street, but he'd probably be better in the open than in this alley with whatever was glaring murderously at him. Unconsciously, Lawrence took a step backwards as he tried to contemplate a plan of action; it was the excuse the thing before him needed.

Quickly closing the distance, the thing launched the spear at his head, as the dagger in its sleeve disappeared from sight. Deftly ducking the spear, Lawrence reached for his sword, only to have his wrist grabbed midway across his chest and shoved against his body. The Chauncy-thing's other hand shoved against Lawrence's face, pushing him down to the stone street as he felt his leg pulled out from beneath him. The side of his face being pushed against the ground, Lawrence reached out with his free hand to push away at Chauncy, only to witness the tail transform into another blackened hand before it pulled his own away. It was over. He was done. Pinned to the street, Lawrence just knew death was standing over him, whatever it was Chauncy was.

"Stupid, stupid man." The Chauncy thing spoke, its voice not Chauncy's own. "You could have just listened to your instincts and walked away, but no. You just had to go and get my dan-



der up!" The thing pressed Lawrence harder into the street, as if to emphasize the point. "You chose the wrong person to slight with your poor excuse of a threat. But don't worry, when I release from whatever sad life you led up to this moment, you may rest knowing that I will be the last one to enjoy your little life." Out of the corner of his eye, and through the Chauncy-thing's fingers, he could see it.

The gleam in the eye, that familiar look of superiority, that familiar line, that horrid, crunching of bone as his jaw distended into a worm-like maw of razor-sharp teeth...

Christ alive, was that-

"Christ!" Lawrence muttered through gritted teeth, "Miri?! Ish...that-"

The Chauncy thing paused, its mouth returned to normal as the pressure against Lawrence's face subsided. Its face contorted to confusion at the expletive, and the name that was muttered. "How do you..." With a sudden shock, the thing stopped pressing against Lawrence's face and gripped it, forcing him to look directly into his eyes. "...Lawrence?!"

"Hey! Miri!" Lawrence joyfully called out, his fear quickly dissipating for however dim a hope recognition was. "Hey! Sorry about the handle and all that, I, I didn't know it was you! I mean, you understand the need of protecting one's business endeavors I hope right? Hey, it was nothing personal and I'd really appreciate it if you let me up and please, God, don't kill me." The Chauncy-thing, Miri, withdrew from her stranglehold on Lawrence, who took the opportunity to sit up from the ground. Miri characteristically put her...his...her Chauncy-like hand up to her chin as a feminine, more familiar chortle escaped her chest. More and more of those haughty mannerisms reared their heads as she looked upwards, amused at the entire situation, as her tail wagged behind her.

"My, my~! Lawrence dear! I hardly recognized you, wearing such a dumb little hat at this hour!" Miri flicked a finger at Lawrence's brimmed hat, teasing him for his choice in attire.

"Uhm, well, I like thank you very much!" Lawrence deflected.

“But hey y’know, for dumb as it looks, it looks even dumber with you having mounted me like this out in public.” As if remembering where she was, Miri quickly dismounted from Lawrence and helped him back up. “Thank you.” Lawrence continued. “I know this seems a little quick, but how about we catch up on this conversation inside? We’ll look a lot less suspicious than talking out in an alley at this hour and I’ll even close the door behind me this time.” Miri pursed her lips in thought and crossed her Chauncy-arms.

“Hm, I’m not sure...” She mused. “I was hoping to find one more easy meal before I moved on tonight. Things have been getting a bit touchy around here as of late.”

“Ah c’mon, you’re starting to sound like me. Surely you’ve enough time for a drink or two?” Miri looked off elsewhere as she mulled over the offer.

“...will you be covering?” She asked. Lawrence stopped himself from cringing as he considered the potential cost she might run him.

“Of course! Only right for a host to provide to a guest he invited!” She gave a toothy smile (what was considered toothy, for whatever teeth Chauncy had had left) at the response.

“Why that sounds lovely~.” Despite the positive answer, Lawrence could feel a sense of static on the breeze, an air of suspicion that filled the alleyway.

“Great! Just, ah, keep your voice down while we’re inside.” Lawrence warned, hoping the disclosure would help keep Tarrant out of things. “The last thing I need is a complaint about noise.” With a cheeky gesture to her mouth, Miri followed Lawrence into the back storage, and into the main bar area. Halfway inside, Lawrence stopped their entrance and asked, “Oh, uh, would you happen to know where Chauncy is, by the way?”

“What the beggar?” Miri asked. “Yes. They’ll probably find him when they comb the city tomorrow for bodies on the witch hunt. Most likely to figure out who belongs and who doesn’t.”

“O-Oh...” Lawrence shakily replied. He had heard about the hunters that were staying in town recently, supposedly on the lookout for some sort of doppelganger, as they put it. To think, Miri was probably the one that was responsible for bringing them around! Though he also breathed a slight sigh of relief. At least he wouldn’t have to worry about dealing with Chauncy anymore; and, of course, that it was her to begin with. He doubted any other kind of impostor would quite as welcome to conversation.

Locking the side door, and dimming the lights further to near darkness, Lawrence showed Miri to one of the clean bar stools available. Lawrence asked, keeping his voice down the entire time, “So is there anything I can-” before stopping himself as he looked back at Chauncy’s face staring back at him. A disconcerting situation, knowing the man who it belonged to was probably a mere husk at this point. “Miri, I’m sorry. Can you...turn back to your regular face or something? Seeing his face like this is just hitting me right in the uncanny valley.” Miri raised a brow before silently shifting her face back to its true, infernal form; horns, fangs, and all.

“The ‘uncanny valley?’ I presume you mean it’s that point where shifters such as myself are frustratingly close to emulating one of your kind, but off the mark just enough to the point where we’re instantly recognizable as nonhuman.”

“That’s the gist of it.” Lawrence replied. “Ah, but before we get too far into me, let’s get into you. Anything in particular you like?”

“Well...” Miri replied, considering her options. “What do you have?”

“Well, if it’s something you can find in the Empire or the Theocracy, I probably have it.” Miri’s expression lit up at the presumed variety.

“Oooh, do you happen to know how to make a thing called ‘Eternal King’s Last Sup?’” Lawrence racked his brain trying to remember if anyone has ever ordered something like it, to no avail.

"I don't believe I do." He answered.

"Ah! Don't worry about it. It's a special drink mix anyways. If you can't do it then I'll have some Taganair wine if you have it." Lawrence winced at the alternative. Taganair wine was expensive, and a missing glass would certainly be noticed. Noting that it would put a dent in this week's salary, Lawrence decided to inquire on the other option.

"Well, what's the drink mix? If I have the booze needed for it, I can try my hand at making it." As if on cue, Miri began to list off the specific recipe details of the mix.

Lawrence almost wept. Miri listed several expensive liquors that were required for the mix, along with various little embellishments that were imperative for the overall taste. Of course she'd have the most expensive tastes it really was he was back at home. Miri must have noted the distress on his face as she stopped her recounting of the exact number of swirls needed to mix the booze together. "Is everything quite all right Lawrence? You look rather wan. If it's the mix I can help cover the cost; money's a means to an end for me."

"No, no, it's fine." Lawrence rebutted. He had offered, after all. "I just, need to get the stuff from the back." Lawrence excused himself from the bar and took his time gathering the liquor, trying to figure out how the hell he was going to hide the difference later. He could probably fill them part way with water, which should fool Mr. Tarrant. It's not often that anyone ordered them either, so he could probably get away with explaining away the taste by adding a drop or two of grain alcohol from the alchemist. Not that the customers would notice the difference.

Hopefully.

Lawrence made several trips for the bottles (and the odd orange), not wanting to risk clinking them together and making unnecessary noise. The ingredients assembled on the bar, Miri asked, "Will you need me to recount the recipe, Lawrence?"

"No, no I should have it all. Uh, it's Worsely before Faifnar right?" Lawrence clarified.

“Yes, it is.” Miri replied, straight backed in her seat. Without a word Lawrence got to work, combining the spirits in the specific order requested in a glass. That old feeling, that sense of danger Lawrence had when he first met with the demoness before him, was back. Not quite as pervasive, but still a spike in his chest as he kept to his own work. But despite the obvious fear, there was something else present, a dull, hollow throb in his chest he couldn’t put his finger on. It was just adrenaline, from the tussle in the alley, he thought. Standing across a bar little less than arm’s length from the patron before him, a mass murdering demoness, probably didn’t help matters any.

“Y’know Miri,” Lawrence started, hoping that conversation would calm his nerves. “I, y’know, it—you seem to not mind me calling you that nickname I’ve noticed.”

“You’re traipsing closer to the edge on that than you think.” Miri responded. “But I’ll admit you’re tiptoeing it well. The fact you didn’t use it when I was about to kill you is very telling that I might not have to deal with you— watch your elbow by the way.”

“Shit!” Heeding Miri’s warning a little too late, Lawrence accidentally elbowed one of the bottles near him, knocking it off the counter. The conversation wasn’t helping at all with his nervousness. However, with sharp reflexes, he managed to catch the bottle just before it could shatter on the ground. He certainly didn’t remember ever being so fast. Maybe it *was* adrenaline. “Well,” Lawrence declared, looking between the recovered bottle and Miri, “seems I’m quick on the draw in general tonight.”

“Very impressive~.” Miri commented as Lawrence continued on with mixing her drink. She let out a little gasp as she leaned into the counter, the Chauncy-esque clothes ruffling against what was probably just Miri’s head on Chauncy’s body; a mental image Lawrence did not enjoy conjuring. “That little display reminds me Lawrence. I thought about your situation and, as a lark, decided to consult an acquaintance of mine about an outsider such as yourself.”

“Really? And what’d that turn up?”

“Basically, just as there are certain outsiders like my kind that

manage to force their way in, so too can more divine ones, angels and the like. Though it seems that, on occasion, there are certain other individuals, such as yourself, that manage to make their way in, though it's usually not without divine intervention that it happens. Apparently, they benefit from certain boons that sprout from their unique presence or mana."

"Hmm." Lawrence contemplated the implication as he poured a particularly fruity liquor from on high, as instructed. "Yes that is very interesting...wait," He set the bottle down and looked Miri in her half-lidded, playful eyes, "are you here to kill me?" Miri let out a throaty chuckle as she leaned into the counter, her tail once again playfully swinging above and behind her. Like a cobra.

"Maybe~." She coyly responded. "Maybe I just find you too enjoyable to just do away with. Maybe I'm just enjoying a brief pause from my work before I get back to it. Who knows~?" She knew what she was doing, teasing him like that. It seemed par the course with her, but the fact she didn't end him despite recognizing him was probably the better answer to his question.

"Lovely. Well, enough about my strange little situation," Lawrence started, his confidence returning as he thought on how to divert any further discussion about his person, "why are you in town? I imagine a place like this is a little too large for you to drain yourself."

"You'd be right. I'm just checking in on my own little stake of territory since I heard there was trouble recently. You know of succubi, right Lawrence?"

"To an extent," Lawrence answered, counting the swirls of the drink. "Demonic, sexual predators that drain men and women or something right?"

"Yes, but unlike a lady such as I, those harlots don't know the beginning of restraint. They find a nice little nest area to dwell in, and instead of biding their time between meals, letting things breath for a bit, they devour any and all they can. No sense of decency or of a long-term plan, just seduce and drain. Day in, day out."

“Like you’re one to talk,” Lawrence prodded, testing the waters for how far he could go, “did you not drain an entire village not too long ago?”

Miri scoffed at the accusation, scolding, “That’s hardly comparable! It’s not like I had a—” As if catching herself, Miri lifted her body from the bar, holding her hands up to create an invisible barrier for herself to stop at. A very telling answer for Lawrence. She got angry, certainly, but it was of a different shade of fury on the spectrum.

It wasn’t murderous, or even savage, but rather that of annoyed embarrassment. She didn’t seem quite as liable to tear his throat out for saying the wrong thing. Though what was more interesting was her answer to it. Not like she had what? A choice? Restraint? Either he had inadvertently called out her hypocrisy, or poked at some other, personal problem of hers.

Recovering her standing, Miri leaned into the bar, not seductively but certainly more exasperated as she rested her arms across each other. “As I was saying, they have no restraint at all, draining any and all who fall for them. In fact, they’re the reason the hunters are in town as we speak. And me, for that matter.”

“Oh?”

“You were there when I had that dour conversation with the captain. Those gauche opportunists are constantly trying to creep into my territory and, as a result, ruining the nice little food supply I’ve available.”

“And you’re here to kick them out?”

“Did. Ordinarily I would’ve slaughtered them and been done with it, but with the witch hunters in town I had to get more creative to get things to die down. Rather than dirty my hands with it I thought to help them with their little investigation; give them a false sense of accomplishment. After that, I was thinking to lay low for a while, maybe draw them away by draining some unfortunate traveler elsewhere to have the place to myself. Unfortunately, because those whores’ loins are always on fire and they can’t stop their emotions, they came after me directly.”

"I take it they weren't successful." Lawrence noted, seeing the lack of injuries on the demoness.

"Ugh." Miri rested her head in her hand and looked towards the barren wall of the bar. "They were successful in being a thorn in my side. Going and forcing me to end them instead of waiting to die at the hand of the hunters. Now the hunters will be searching until snowfall and I'm out of a hunting ground. Is that drink ready yet?" She cast a sideways glance to her bartender, visibly bored at the conversation.

"One more thing, that orange topping I think." Corking the last bottle and setting it aside, Lawrence moved onto the finishing touch of the drink. Taking a knife, he skinned the fruit of its outer layer, a fine mist erupting from the orange as the blade pierced its quarry. Choosing the most promising section of the orange, he quickly retrieved the seed from within and placed the slice on the rim of the drink glass. It was veritable fruit basket of a drink, made up of several fruit-based liquors mixed into a rainbow of various shades of red and violet. If he had to guess, the orange slice was more for presentation.

"Here you are," Lawrence presented, "One 'Eternal King's Last Sup.' Though I'd be damned if I know why it's called that."

"Ah, it's a little drink I picked up while mixing with the nobility of the Theocracy. It's something they whip up whenever a new pope is coronated or something like that." Miri took the glass in hand and brought it half-way to her lips before pausing. She let her eyes trail to the drink before trailing back to Lawrence, that look of suspicion ever present.

"Something wrong?" Lawrence asked, playing things coolly.

"I've just had a thought Lawrence," Miri mused, eyeing the glass, "this is your first Eternal King...why don't you taste it first?" She offered the drink back, putting forth a façade of playful confidence. "It'll help you get the taste for it in the future, as well as a little sample in case you like it."

It was a bullshit excuse and Lawrence knew it. "What's the matter?" He teased in response. "I figured poison didn't work on your kind. Does that mean alcohol don't work either if that's the



case?" Miri wordlessly set the glass down on the bar in response. "Suit yourself." Taking a small spoonful of the mix with the mixing spoon, he dropped a sample onto the side of his thumb near the wrist before supping it down.

The taste was as expected, a vitriolic punch of alcohol that was accented by a veritable grab bag of fruity flavors, of apples, oranges, grapes, and cherries. Physically wincing at the taste, he cocked his head to the side as he took in the flavors of each of the alcohols mixed with one another. Worsely, the orange focused spirit mixed glumly with the Faifnar apple, and the combination of cherry from the Banai and the grape taste from the Neutone served as a bittersweet capstone to the entire affair. Overall, it tasted as a gluttonous, overpriced drink special you'd see in a cheap bar.

"Certainly fruity. I'll give it that."

"Never hurts to test the waters, Lawrence. Yes, poison has no effect, and I'd truly have to try in order to get drunk. Not that I ever look to do it, mind you." Miri took up the glass once again and took a sip from it. Upon letting the liquor touch that devilish tongue of hers, Miri swooned with pleasure as her eyes rolled upwards in satisfaction. The glass, now, was a quarter empty. "Mmh, goodness. It's been so long since I've had one of these."

"I'm glad you're enjoying it." Lawrence responded. "Sad to hear about your, uh, territory thing, but cool to hear you're doing well overall." Without anything else to add to the conversation, the ball essentially in Miri's court, Lawrence restarted his nightly duty to clean the bar. Grabbing the previously discarded rag, he started to idly wipe down the bar to rid it of sticky splotches of spilt alcohol and ale as he let his patron partake in her drink. He didn't pay her much attention, in all honesty. He was satisfied enough to give her a moment of rest and a relaxing drink to enjoy.

It's why he jumped when Miri suddenly asked, "What do you want from me Lawrence?"

"Eh, pardon?" He stammered. Miri was looking directly at him, her drink resting against the bar. Her eyes were stern,

with an equally serious expression that sent a chill up Lawrence's spine.

"Quit with the sweet talk Lawrence. What are you buttering me up for?"

"I've absolutely no idea what you're talking about." Lawrence denied. " 'Buttering you up?' I'm just being nice is all."

"That's what irking me. Why *are* you being so nice to someone who's nearly killed you on several occasions? What are you hoping to get out of this?" Miri demanded.

"That's...actually a really good question." Lawrence paused his wipe down of the bar and held his own chin in thought. Why was it he was being so kind with his money that he so desperately needed? And why Miri, who has nearly slaughtered him several times in the past, let alone the past couple of minutes, and not towards someone like Chauncy? And why is it that, even with everything calmed down now, why did it feel like his heart was going to pound out of his chest? Why was his chest still throbbing?! Why did it feel so, so, *empty*? "Let's see...actually, I got one. As much as I hate to say this, I think you're the one person who bothered listening to me about where I was from or the crap I put up with, and with interest at that! And, as dopey as it'll sound, it was kind of you to tell me where I was, as well as regaling with your home, in exchange."

Miri was visibly taken aback at the answer. "What, you think I'm..." After an amused scoff, she let out a loud "HA!" before quieting herself down as Lawrence hurriedly shushed her. He glanced upstairs, waiting to hear the creaking of floor of Tarrant waking up over Miri's prattling. "A 'kind person.' That's rich of you. Wiser humans wouldn't dare to call me a person Lawrence, for good reason. I think you're mistaking a passing interest for genuine concern." If Tarrant had woken up, he'd hear the floorboards creaking, Tarrant was fat enough that he should hear it. At least, he thought he should hear it, from when he went upstairs earlier tonight.

Sure he didn't hear Tarrant wake up, Lawrence turned his concern back to Miri. "I think you're being too grand with how

inhuman you are. You're thinking and talking like anyone else, so the fact you listened to me warrants some respect, at least to me."

If you say so." Miri took another drink of her Eternal King, her glass only half full, half empty. A bemused look came across her face as a thought came to her. "I say...on the topic of you, how ever did you come into a place such as this Lawrence? I didn't take you as one to quickly learn about alcohol, let alone to hit the ground for running a business."

"What? Ah, nah, nah!" Lawrence quickly attempted to deflect. "I mean, it's nothing. There's really nothing to it really. Nothing at all."

"Come now. You can't expect me to believe you just had the knowledge to know what to stock in a place like this, or the contacts to get them in the first place."

"Hey, maybe I happened to find a book or something about how to run the place or what to stock for a fine establishment such as this!"

A masculine voice called out from the staircase on the other side of the bar, "You mean the fine establishment that I *let* you run, Lawrence." Lawrence tensed up in utter fear as his worst-case scenario began to play out before him. He looked to the stairs, to the bulbous, perpetually red-faced owner, Mr. Tarrant, his boss. His owner. How on Earth did he not hear him coming down the stairs?!

"*Mr. Tarrant!*" Lawrence stuttered, withdrawing his arms closer to his body. "I was, Uhm," Getting caught with Miri was assuredly a death sentence, what with her infernal nature. He quickly glanced to Miri, trying to figure out her reaction to things, as well as to look to her for direction, only to find that Miri had shifted her head to look like Chauncy once again, completing her disguise.

"What is he doing in here?" Mr. Tarrant demanded in a low, serious tone as he waddled down the rest of the stairs. "And moreover, what is *he* doing with a glass of *my* liquor?!" Turning

the lights down on the interior lanterns had been a good decision, he couldn't see Miri's true face clearly from where he was.

Ok, he was safe from being burned at the stake. Though there was still the matter of serving liquor after hours...

"He uh, he came in while I was closing." Lawrence replied, leaning against the bar and putting a hand in his pocket. He still had his pocket gold on him; he could use this! Maybe he could bribe him, in a way. "He had coin enough for a drink, so I figured he'd be fine with no one else in here." Tarrant, with an ever-present glare, made his way over to the bar and stood next to Miri who kept to her hunched over look in her seat, eyes wide like a guilty party caught in a crime. She glanced over to Tarrant, much in the same fashion as she did Lawrence earlier. Dear god what was she going to try and pull?

"Get out of here you *drunk*." Tarrant growled in Miri's face. "I don't want your stench anywhere near this place. So help me if Lawrence won't take the handle to you I will! Get lost!"

Miri stared at Tarrant for a brief moment, casting a glance over at her drink. Lawrence could practically see the wheels turning in her head, as if she were considering every little option for what to say, or to say anything at all. Was she considering if Tarrant would recognize what Chauncy should sound like? Abruptly, Miri gave a curt, bum-like "Yes'm." before pushing away from the bar counter. Lawrence watched, with a sinking heart, as his only potential collaborator for a deception walked right out of the door, leaving him alone to deal with his ogre of an employer.

Tarrant turned to Lawrence, standing directly across the bar from him. "You say he paid?" He asked.

"He did." Lawrence replied.

"Show me." Quietly, Lawrence took out his gold pouch and began to count the amount he would need to give over. He'd need to be careful; he hadn't had the chance to put away any of the liquor bottles, let alone to refill them. If he knew Tarrant any, he'd already have the total calculated in his plump skull. Looking at the amount he had on hand, he was going to have to use all

of the gold in his personal spending money. He'd just have to go the month without a visit to the bathhouse.

"There you are." Lawrence dutifully answered, handing the gold over to Tarrant for inspection. "That's just about all he put in. From what I've counted it should more than cover—"

The slap was sudden and powerful, and made ever more painful with the adage of the karat gold.

Lawrence fell to the ground, the clatter of coins following him as he was momentarily stunned from the blow. "That's for letting the booze hound drink in here." Tarrant scolded. As Lawrence stood up from the blow, Tarrant helped him up by pulling him upwards by the collar of his shirt, before sending him back to the ground with another powerful slap. His hat flew off from the force of the blow, exposing his buzz cut head. "And that's for letting anyone drink in here after hours, despite my strict directions!" Yet again, Lawrence felt himself pulled up by the collar as Tarrant practically dragged him across the bar, bringing him face to face with his fury. "Are you trying to ruin my establishment Lawrence? What have I told you time and time again?! Image is everything for this place! And I can't have someone like Chauncy polluting it with his stink! You're not purposely trying to ruin this place are you? You *do* remember the debt you owe me don't you?!"

Fighting back the urge to gag from Tarrant's breath, Lawrence forced himself to shake his head and to spit out, "I haven't forgotten, Mr. Tarrant."

"Then you know that what you did was wrong, right?" Lawrence gritted his teeth. "Right?"

"Right."

"Then you know you'll have to pay to fix this wrong." Damn it! If Lawrence knew Tarrant any, it was going to be a week's salary that he'd be taking! A week's worth of time for the debt to rack up!

"Of course, Mr. Tarrant." Lawrence responded.

"Good. Then clean the bar and get ready for tomorrow. I'll have no more of this nonsense tonight." As Tarrant released

Lawrence, he turned to leave before pausing where he stood. He turned back to Lawrence and once again grabbed him by the collar. "Actually, one more to make sure the point sticks." Lawrence braced himself for another blow as Tarrant brought his arm upwards to wind up for his final strike.

A strike that, thankfully, never came.

A clawed hand grabbed Tarrant's wrist from behind, stopping his arm mid swing. As the bar owner turned to face whatever had so rudely stopped him, his expression turned from incredulous anger to utter horror when he realized the injector was a horrific demoness. Another hand gripped his throat, forcing him against the bar as the demoness glared into his eyes, some unknown power forcing the fat bastard to go limp in her grasp. Wordlessly, Tarrant stood up from his slouch against the bar and was allowed to slowly trudge back upstairs to his room, like a puppet on string. Miri had dropped all pretenses of her disguise, her true form laid bare for Lawrence to take in. That same wily, womanly form.

"You did it again." Lawrence quipped, rubbing at his cheek.

"Nonsense," Miri denied, lacking her usual suave tone, "I simply didn't finish my drink." Miri sat back down at her seat and collected her drink glass, taking another sup of her order. "I can only assume you haven't been at all truthful with me."

"Gee, what gave that away?"

"Come now, we're well acquainted with one another Lawrence. We shouldn't be hiding such minor details from one another. I told you what I was up to, didn't I?" Lawrence, feeling as though he was being disarmed of any wittiness he had stored up, let his shoulders slump in defeat.

"Ah, what the hell." He admitted, caving in to the probing. "I'm going to be honest, things have gone to complete shit." Lawrence leaned into the bar as Miri idly tended to her own glass of booze. "The stuff I picked up from where we met didn't sell well at all; not the gold, the blades, nothing. Nobody would give me any deals or hire me for anything either, due to being a complete stranger. With the weather getting colder and colder, I

couldn't stay in the vagrant camp any longer and made the mistake of begging for shelter in exchange for service."

"Hmm." Miri hummed. "Fell for the indentured servitude trap, did you? I assume he's providing a bed and food, which he deducts from your pay, if it's even enough to pay for it. Is that why you cut and tried to hide your hair?" Lawrence reached a hand to his head, just now realizing he wasn't wearing his cap.

"Yes, actually. Tarrant forced me to cut it. Said that it would scare customers or something like that. Anytime I 'mess up,'" Lawrence bent his fingers for emphasis on the sarcasm, "or even appear to slight him, he either hits me or docks my pay and I can't do anything about it." Lawrence looked down at the bar as he recounted his dreary experience working with Tarrant, and of tending the bar in his stead. "For fuck's sake, I can't even talk to anyone else about it. It seems like everyone either just brushes me off or ignores me. Almost like they can tell that I don't belong here and, as a result, want nothing to do with me. Even the regulars that come in barely wish to talk to me at times. And even when I *can* talk to them, I barely understand what it is they're talking about in the first place. From politics to whatever drama is going on in town, I just, can't connect to them whatsoever."

Lawrence paused in his account, almost on the verge of tears, as Miri idly stared at him, expecting him to continue. "But you want to know the worst part about all of it though, Miri?"

"Worse than the beatings?" She mused.

"Yeah, worse than that." Miri, seemingly interested now in his plight, set her glass down on the counter and leaned inwards to absorb every word. A glass mostly empty. "It's not enough that I'm stuck here, practically a slave, that can't even connect with other people. It...it feels like I'm right back at square one."

Miri raised a brow. "'Square one?'"

"All my life it's felt like I've been getting led along. From following in someone's footsteps, living in their shadow, or being told every little thing I needed to do. It's as if I've never gone in a direction that I've wanted." Miri cocked her head in curiosity, a very visible tell to elaborate. "I mean, I just, want to set out on

my own path, for once. I don't want anyone else lording over me, telling me what to do with my life. And now I'm in the exact opposite of where I want to be." Slumping fully against the bar, Lawrence resigned himself to wallowing in the misery of his situation.

"Sounds like you're stuck in a place you don't want to be." Miri commented.

"I just don't know what to do. It's not like I can get another job or even just punch Tarrant. He'll just call the authorities on me for trying to evade my debt and they'll throw me in prison." Lawrence let a half-lidded eye drift back to Miri who took to finishing her drink. Sitting up straight, she set the empty glass on the counter and filled it with a shot from the nearby Faifnar bottle before pushing it closer to Lawrence. A glass empty, but now refilled, if only partially.

"I don't suppose you're hinting that I should call in that favor?" Lawrence questioned.

"Not at all." Miri answered softly. "But I do have an idea of what you're going through. Tell you what Lawrence, I'll help you." Lawrence raised his head from his arms, looking at his infernal companion with suspicion. "Keep the favor. Consider this a free blessing."

"Really now." Lawrence questioned. What was she getting up to? "What exactly are you thinking?"

"If memory serves me correctly, then the laws of inheritance of property here in Threnfollow go as such: blood heirs first, then to whomever is closely associated with the deceased. This includes servants, indentured or not, whose debts are doubly forgiven due to the passing of whomever holds it." Of course that's what she was getting up to.

"I see. I assume you're not worried for any investigation?"

"With what I plan to do his death will be so unnatural that no one should suspect you. I don't believe anyone's seen me entering this place or conversing with you, so no worry of an investigation there. Do you know if the fat man had any distant relations or family?" She was looking at him with a neutral ex-



pression now. Not angry, not devilish, not even self-satisfied. It was as if she were merely discharging a duty of service that she had done time and time again. Lawrence shrugged in response.

“Never talked about ’em.”

“I see. It’s not a problem, I’ll ask him myself. Where do you typically sleep?”

“A room separate from where he typically sleeps.”

“Alright. I’m going to deal with him while he’s in bed then. What’s your typical routine from this hour onward?”

“I typically clean up the bar, get it ready for tomorrow, then go to bed. I usually work quickly so I don’t go to bed too late. I presume I’ll tell them of my usual routine?”

“Exactly. When those witch hunters inevitably ask you what you did tonight, and if you’ve seen Tarrant, you’ll tell them you closed up, as per usual, and you went straight to bed and didn’t see anything out of the ordinary. Don’t add any details you don’t need to; they’ll look for anything that can contradict your story. Understood?”

“Got it.” Lawrence nodded.

“Good.” Miri moved to stand but stopped herself as she looked at Lawrence’s face. “Goodness, you’re already starting to swell up.” As if remembering what happened, Lawrence winced as the soreness in his cheek swelled up all at once.

“Damn it that actually smarts.” He cursed, tasting the blood pooling in his mouth.

“Let me see.” Miri reached across the bar and pulled Lawrence’s hand away from his face, getting a better view of the bruising. “Oh my, that’s actually starting to welt up. Did he strike you with those coins you were giving him?”

“He did.”

“Such a brute that man. Here, I’ll help make it feel better.” Before Lawrence could react, Miri gently pulled him forward over the bar and planted her soft, velvet lips upon his cheek. With a soft peck, she kissed the site where he had been struck before pulling away. Lawrence clutched at his cheek as Miri gave him a small grin as she pulled away from the bar. “Take care Lawrence.

Oh, and say a bottle hit you on the cheek as you were putting it away." Miri, in all her seductive glory, sauntered towards the stairs and upwards to Tarrant's room.

Who did she think she was? Giving a man a random kiss on the cheek like that? Recoiling from the sudden display of what had to be faux affection, another thought crossed Lawrence's mind. A question he had been meaning to ask ever since that day in the woods. "Hey, Miri," Lawrence called out. Miri stopped where she was on the stairs, a hand resting on the handrail. "Just one more thing."

"Yes, Lawrence?"

"Why did you leave me alone that day?"

"..What do you mean?"

"When I learned your name. You said you worked hard to have forgotten. Why didn't you just off me then and there?" Miri, who had not been one to break eye contact from distress, turned her head away from Lawrence and towards the wall. She stayed in that position for some time, as if contemplating how to answer in a fashion as Lawrence did earlier. With how haughty she was, it struck Lawrence that she was being exceptionally careful with the words she chose.

"I...did mean it when I said I enjoyed our conversation. I thought it'd be a shame for such an interesting outsider such as yourself to perish so quickly in this world. Good luck in your future endeavors, Lawrence." A cop out answer, but a safe one.

"Take care Miri." Lawrence responded, eager to say farewell on this occasion. Miri didn't turn back to Lawrence as she ascended the stairs, leaving Lawrence to nurse his hurts and his bar. Seeing no other course, he took the glass Miri had filled for him and downed the shot in a single gulp. The taste of the alcoholic apple was sharp, to be sure, but a refreshing boost as he continued with his regular cleanup of the bar. Once he had finished and locked up, he journeyed upstairs and past Tarrant's bed, deathly silent from his usual snoring, into his crummy little closet of a room. Slumping into his own bed, it took some time for sleep to come over him.

A glass empty, but eager to be refilled.

\* \* \*

Lawrence awoke the next morning to find Tarrant a dried husk in bed, the window leading outside fully open with curtains fluttering in the chilly fall breeze. Because of the preternatural nature of the barkeep's death, and Lawrence's "ignorance" as to what happened, no indictments were given. Blame, therefore, was instead levied on the same fiend that had drained Chauncy and so many others in town. Frustrated by their lack of progress, the witch hunters eventually left, pursuing the trail of infernal influence that led elsewhere in the kingdom.

Several days later, the only blood heir to Tarrant's bar and Lawrence's debt, Tarrant's son, was found on the side of a far distant road. He was found dumped in a ditch, his throat slit and missing his gold pouch. As a result, Lawrence was the sole inheritor of the bar, for lack of anyone better. Not that Lawrence complained.

### III

## Heart-To-Heart in a Frozen Wasteland

In the fall, just some time ago, the meadow had still been in full bloom. Thousands of white petaled meadow flowers would have acted as the blanket for the ground, mixing with millions of blades of healthy emerald grass. Now, with the arrival of winter, the land was suffocated by a cover of snow, crushing the flowers until they withered and died. It wasn't long after, that the snow would serve as a mattress for even greater death, an overcast sky serving as a top cover.

The armies of the kingdoms of man fought hard, but there was only so much that could be done against an army of infernal pikemen, and the tide of the walking dead. The forces of man had

been sent back in a complete rout. It was every man for himself as opportunistic demons and those under their service sought to sacrifice and devour those unfortunate enough to be caught. The only salvaging quality of such a massacre was the crippling of the demonic host, which stemmed its advance into the land of man.

The battlefield itself was littered with blood and destroyed war machines. Bodies of the mortal and diabolic were in the process either being raised to fight again (or devoured, depending on what got to it first) or dissipating into nothingness, their æther retreating to the abyss from whence they came. It was a veritable land of death, where only foolish but wily scavengers, or ferocious predators still roamed. The two appellations, however, were not mutually exclusive from one another.

She slinked quietly through the battlefield, carefully but fearlessly darting between the shadows of the various wreckages scattered around the field. While the few remaining ghouls or the imps wouldn't be of any consequence to one of her stature, she'd still prefer to not have to deal with their dribble if they saw her. Always "Who do you serve" this, "What do you need here" that. Not to mention that the last thing she wanted to deal with was announcing her presence to their leader, Thalbolga, a wretched fat lump of a demon.

The man she was looking for, the prince, still had to be around here somewhere. His honor guard had to have died to a man for a reason, they'd never have left his side in battle for any reason, not even against suicidal odds. But she'd already checked the body pile, he wasn't amongst them, and she'd already looked over the congregation of the raised dead. It meant he was either still alive, or...

She pushed the thought from her head. She didn't want to have to consider the possibility that the fool could be dead, or that Thalbolga had ignored the missive she'd sent. If that meat-head Thalbolga had captured him, she'd have a hell of a time getting him out without giving her demonic influence away.

Groaning in frustration, she perched herself atop the remains of a diabolic trebuchet, its ghastly crew having long aban-

done it. She needed to calm herself down, to think on the situation. If he made it out, she'd hear about where he was later, but sitting still for so long waiting for news did not fill her with confidence. The High Lord would want to hear something productive...

The roar of galloping hooves and bouncing wagon wheels broke the demoness, Miriel, from her rumination. It was a covered, mortal wagon, made of wood and being dragged by two draft horses of mundane origin through the field at a moderate trot. It'd be easy enough to dismiss it as a runaway wagon, but there clearly had to be someone driving the thing forward.

What *buffoon* would be foolish enough to still be here when the battlefield so clearly belonged to the dead and the damned?!

But maybe such a buffoon had more wits about him than she was giving him credit for...

Miriel crept down the tower and quickly moved to get ahead of the wagon's path. Along the way she worked on a suitable guise she could adopt to get close. An injured soldier would work, she'd seen enough of their armor to adopt an accurate recreation of it as well. There was the matter of a face to adopt, she could just take the face of any random man she'd seen before, and it could work. A broad chinned man with broad shoulders and short cut blonde hair would do fine. Just generic enough to not raise suspicion. Oh, but there was the matter of helmet! If she just showed up without a helmet...well, she could just hand wave it away as it got knocked off in the fighting. A head wound, however superficial yet visible, should sell it.

Yes, she would be a soldier that got separated from his unit in the rout. That would work! And of course, she could wave off any trouble answering questions due to the head wound.

She was ready!

From behind a wreckage, she dashed out into the way of a wagon, waving her arms in faux desperation. "Ay!" She called out, taking on the Southern, Empire drawl. "Ay 'old up! Wait up!" The wagon driver, clearly surprised by her sudden appearance, swerved to avoid trampling her beneath his horses' hoofs.

She was ready to chase after the wagon, prepared to force the man to stop with constant yelling and hollering, attention he clearly would not want. No such course of action was needed, thankfully, as the driver brought the wagon around and back towards her. The wagon driver stopped a short distance away from her and held the reins to the horses across his lap, occasionally tugging on them to keep the horses in line. The driver wore a shiny suit armor of the Theocracy, and wore a helmet with a chain coif that acted as a veil, concealing his face but leaving his eyes exposed; clearly gear of quality. The driver's gaze was steely and almost unnerving, as if he were judging every move that she made.

If he was a man of the church, then squeezing him for information was going to be more trouble than she initially anticipated. But with such armor, he also stood the best chance of getting the answers she needed...

"You seem far from your regiment." The driver spoke, his accent not one that Miriel could immediately recognize. It wasn't Empire, and certainly not as refined a cadence as a Theocrat. She'd heard it before...but where?

"Ach," Miriel responded, needing to keep the disguise. "We were in a full 'un rout, I tripped over a few things and wound up getting left behind. Been searchin' fer a way to go between avoiding demons and the walkin' dead."

"Lose your helmet?"

"Yeah, damn, pitchfork wieldin' devil knocked it off. Would've got me good if it weren't fer it. Hey, mind if I hop on? Seem's you've got your bearings about ye." The wagon driver stared at her for a second and cocked his head as he looked off elsewhere. Did he buy it? Was he about to tell her off?

"No, no problem at all." The driver answered. "Get in the back and I'll get us going." Miriel purposefully widened her eyes as if to show excitement at her supposed chance at salvation.

"Ach, perfect! Gods bless ye." She could see it play out already. She'd climb in the back, and the driver might give another glance to her before pushing the horses forward. From there, she

could either jump him there, or she could wait for a quiet moment, either night fall or as soon when they left the battlefield. She'd make sure to get behind him, pinning him down with her tail acting as a knife's edge for a deterrent. Then she could interrogate him at her leisure and figure out what he knew. He'd probably put up a fight, if she got sloppy somewhere, but provided he didn't have any tricks up his sleeve and didn't know better, she could just go for the long hunt.

What she didn't expect, however, was to board the wagon with the driver already inside, aiming a loaded crossbow at her.

"W-wot's this then?" She incredulously cried. "The hell're ye thinking?!"

"Cut the crap," The driver gruffly retorted. "What kind of soldier would bother sticking around this shithole? Certainly you could be sneaking about, but that'd make you very damn lucky. Too lucky. Only way you're still around and breathing is if you're a demon yourself."

"Wha—" Miriel was taken aback. Who did he think he was to be accusing someone of something *he* was guilty of?! "What do ye mean?! The same thing could go fer you! How do I know *you* ain't a demon?!"

"Because," the driver paused, as if trying to find his words. "Because I'm the one holding you at crossbow point. I don't have to explain shit." The man's vocabulary was gruff, much gruffer than anyone in the Theocracy, especially a soldier as decorated as he seemed. Where *was* that accent from? "Either way, I didn't pick you up out of the goodness of my heart. If you are a soldier, drop your weapon and get out. And if you ain't a soldier then I guess it narrows down who you are."

"Then, then if ye think I am a demon, wot makes ye think you'd win against me?! *if*, I were a demon!" The driver shrugged. His gaze didn't give any hints of worry.

"I get by. If you ain't got nothing to drop, get lost. Less you feel you can still talk your way out of this. You're more than welcome to try." The arrogance of this man! That he thinks he can

dictate what she should or could do! That he has control over this situation?!

“If, if ye don’t let me on, I’ll scream. That way we both got a problem.” The driver moved his finger to the crossbow’s trigger.

“Go ahead. See what happens.” Why, the nerve! Miriel let her act of the desperate, injured soldier drop, and let her face stoop to a savage fury. Quietly, she let her tail regrow from the small of her back and crept it out and along the fabric cover on the outside of the wagon.

“How *dare* you,” She growled, making eye contact with the man. “You think you can just talk down to anyone you please? You aren’t in control here, human. If you beg for mercy and prostrate yourself before me, I might consider making your death quick for insulting one such as I.”

“No, I don’t think I will, actually.”

Ha! Directly into her trap! Focusing her power, she projected her willpower against the man, utilizing their eye contact as a bridge between them. “Then you will *kneel* before me.” The driver...

...merely cocked his head in curiosity. He didn’t even break eye contact.

“Did you just try to charm me?” The driver asked. Miriel fought back the urge to retreat from the defiant answer. Who was this man? Some strange, new kind of elite soldier of the Theocracy? Impossible, he was too crude for such a position. “You wouldn’t be the first to try that trick on me. It’s almost cute that that seems to be the catchall response to person problems for you people.” Cute? *Cute*?!

“You arrogant, theocratic dog!” Miriel furiously roared. If he wouldn’t be forced to kneel magically, then she would force him to kneel physically. She drew her tail back before thrusting its spear-like tip through the fabric and towards the driver, who was caught off guard by implement. Frustratingly, the tail was deflected by the man’s armor, hitting at an awkward angle and skewing harmlessly off. The man’s armor was clearly of quality, maybe even magical. It wouldn’t matter, if she dealt with it



up close; with his hands full he was bound to be at a disadvantage. With a snarl, she charged forward bearing quickly shifting talons to attempt to gut the driver. Instead of stepping backwards, however, the driver instead charged forward, ramming his shoulder into Miriel's chest, forcing her back with his weight. She was rapidly running out of options.

She needed to run; she lost the element of surprise. Miriel brought her tail about again, hoping to either whip at the man's exposed eyes or to distract him enough to make her escape. With a grunt, the man slapped away the tip as it tried to whip around for another strike, giving him the time he needed to aim and fire the crossbow. Miriel cried out as the bolt worked its way into her thigh, a searing pain spreading from the impact site through the rest of her leg. She dropped to her knee, her leg suddenly unable to support her weight. "How, *dare you!*" She cried out in frustration. Before she could shout anything else, the man's boot planted itself firmly into her face, smashing her nose in and forcing her out of the wagon.

She fell into a heap outside, the impact sending a shock up her back and pulverizing her back. The driver was quick to follow her out, standing at the precipice of the wagon as Miriel gathered her wits. "Good try," The driver commented, "but you should've walked when you had the chance." The driver jumped down from the wagon and began walking to where Miriel lay sprawled on the ground. She tried to crawl away, but the man quickly stepped on the middle her outstretched tail, stopping her escape and sending a shock of pain running up to the base of her spine. The driver drew a sword from a scabbard on his waist, clearly preparing to deliver the coup de grace to her prone form.

"Damn it, NO!" Miriel, desperate for an escape, quickly worked her tail back out of the wagon and freed itself from the fabric, before thrusting it directly at the man's head. She saw the man's eyes shift to his side, before he deftly turned and, with one deft swing, cleft the head of her tail off. She cried out, as the shock of the injury reached the rest of her body, only to have the driver put a boot down on her chest, pinning her and knocking

her breath from her chest. She had decisively lost.

She had nothing left. What could she even do? Screaming for attention would assuredly result in her death, and even if she survived it would bring embarrassment and humiliation that she would never live down. Then again, having someone rescue her was still better than spending an eternity back in the abyss.

“You...” she snarled, at a loss for words. Even when the captain was bearing down on her she had something she could try and guilt him with. “You think that what you’re doing is for the greater good? You think killing me will make anything better? It won’t. There are many others just waiting to take my place.” The man shrugged

“Maybe. I don’t really care either way.” Nothing to work with! What about that armor...a man of the Theocracy would surely care about godliness.

“Oh, you don’t care, do you? You must be making the church and your Goddess very proud with that line of thinking.”

“You could have walked away, you idiot. You could have walked away or talked, and I wouldn’t have cared less. It wasn’t my choice to get brought to this place, and it certainly wasn’t my choice to get drafted against my will either. I don’t give a shit that I was brought here for some, grander purpose, and never will. I’m content to carve out my own path in the world, one way or another.”

Wait a minute, brought here? If he meant this battlefield, he’d only say getting drafted. Not to mention that there’s no way he’d fit in anywhere in the Theocracy! They’re drilled about duty since birth! No soldier would be complaining about being brought here if that were the case!

But wait, that accent, that manner of speaking, it’s more like he doesn’t fit...anywhere. And carving his own path? She’s heard that before.

No, it couldn’t be! Fate couldn’t be so cheeky as to let it happen again!

“Either way, doesn’t matter now. I’m not going to let myself be known as someone to treat like a dog. Dealt with it with debt,

dealt with it with the damn church,” The driver raised his sword, ready to swing it downwards, “no more.” Miriel had no other option, she just had to try!

“...Lawrence?”

The driver paused, holding his sword aloft. His eyes gave it away, he was in shock, but there was still a glint of suspicion about him. Was it truly? Nervously, Miriel did away with her disguise and returned to her true, womanly form. The disguise didn't matter at this point; her true form might bear greater fruit.

Her heart nearly skipped a beat when the driver, in a softer tone, softly asked, “...Miri?” Lawrence, realizing his folly, quickly got off her chest and dropped to a knee at her side. Closer now, she could see his mana more clearly through his eyes, the window to his soul. His mana was just as dull and small as ever.

“God, Miri, I'm so sorry!” He blustered out. “I didn't know it was you! If you had just even talked for a bit, I could've figured it out! God, what, what the hell do I even do with this...” He waved his hands about her person, in a clear panic of what to do.

He was genuinely concerned! It'd be adorable, if he hadn't also just put a crossbow bolt in her. “God, Miri! What the hell are you even doing here? I thought you were a social predator!” Miri could only look back at him in shock at such a question.

What am I doing here?! What are *you* doing here?” Miriel retorted. “I thought you had a bar to run! Don't tell me they decided to draft a noncitizen in the Empire, and in *Theocracy* armor no less!”

“Look it's a lot more complicated than, Graagh!” Lawrence looked about the area, wisely keeping watch for anything that might be seeing him. “Miri, I can't stay here for long, I need to keep moving. How do I help fix you? I'm not an expert on demon physicality so you're going to need to help me help you.” Great, now he supposes he can just fix her!

“Ergh, there's nothing you can do to fix this Lawrence.” Miriel growled. “Besides that, I don't,” Miriel tried to stand up on her own, determined to prove Lawrence wrong, “I don't need *anyone's* he—*ah!*” Miriel fell back down in a heap, her leg unable to sup-

port her. Even lying still, the pain throughout her leg was intense and pervasive, no matter how she kept it.

“Miri, drop the pride. You can’t even stand.”

“I’m fine! I’ll just find some, some desperate peasant to drain and I’ll be back to normal!”

“Yeah?” Lawrence questioned, putting away his sword. “And how long will you be dragging yourself through the snow to do that? Or will you be flying along on strength you probably don’t have?”

“I’ve strength enough. I wouldn’t be where I am if I just dropped dead at the stiffest sign of resistance, Lawrence.”

“Really? Is that why you refuse to regrow that tail of yours?” Lawrence picked up the detached tip of her tail, already dissipating away into nothingness like flakes of burning parchment (much like her lie). Damn him! He was as perceptive and wily as ever, catching her out like that. “Look, come here. I think I learned to do this right..” Without any consideration to her pride, Lawrence carefully scooped his hands beneath the demoness’ back and knees.

“Hey!” Miriel chided, “What do you think you’re doing?!”

“I’m taking you with me till I find something to help you out.”

“Over my dead body!” Lawrence, obviously not caring, began to stand up, lifting her body with him. “How dare you! Drop me this instant or so help me I will tear your throat out with my bare hands!”

“I bet you will.”

“I mean it! Why you’re making me so infuriated I could just!” Miriel kicked her legs out, trying to express her anger, but only succeeded in agitating her leg wound again. She hissed in pain as she instinctually scrunched her body closed.

“That’s what I thought.” Lawrence scoffed. As much as she hated to admit it, he was right. Though the wounds wouldn’t be enough to sign a death warrant, it still left her vulnerable to anything opportunistic enough to end her or, even worse, steal her essence for themselves. As it stood, she was at his mercy as much as anyone else’s.

Worse still was the humiliation. It was like a, a gaping hole in her chest. But wait, he'd gotten the better of her before. She knew what it felt like. She would feel more of it in her face, like a sour note from an instrument. She didn't feel any of that here, none of the sourness, none of burning either. She just felt...hollow, with only a slight tightness in the cheeks. She was embarrassed, yet, strangely, didn't care either.

"..You could at least help walk me to the wagon." She deflected, searching for her pride. Lawrence gave a chuckle at the request.

"That'd be unbecoming of a lady, and of me to let her hobble like that, not to mention having to climb up too. I'll let you choose your seat if it makes you feel any better." With a huff, Miriel let the topic drop, feeling as though she was plummeting herself down the pit of being coddled. Pits knew that she hated having to pose as a princess on that one occasion, pretending to be so helpless...

Lawrence, keeping his word, eventually managed to hoist the demoness up and into the cart, giving her a better view of the interior without having to worry about being shot (again.) The inside was barren, with the exception of a chest, a random stool, a blanket on the ground of wagon, and many, many faded bloodstains on the wood. "What a mess. Strange. Could have sworn you gave me grief for draining a village." Miriel pointed out, hoping for some form of amusement to distract her from the searing pain in her leg.

"First of all, that was in regard to succubi. Second, I found it like this."

"Just as empty?"

"..Ok there was like *one* guy hiding in here. He wasn't going to make it anyways; it was a dead wagon or something. Just pick a place to sit." Well, a change in attitude. Whatever happened certainly hardened Lawrence up. Happy she had at least gotten one up on her fellow outsider, Miriel set about picking out which place to sit. The blanket, the cleanest thing in the wagon, seemed to offer the best space for her leg. She moved to set herself down

on it before Lawrence stopped her.

“Ok,” Lawrence interrupted, stopping her. “Maybe not *that* option. That’s all the merchandise I’m going to try and sell.”

“What? Merchandise?” Lawrence took a moment to help her sit down on the chair, much to her chagrin, not even giving her the choice of where to sit (though she’d be lying if sitting didn’t feel better than standing.) He then moved over to the blanket to unveil what he was collecting. Beneath the sheet was a collection of weapons: various morning stars, maces, swords, and blades all in various of repair.

“I’m working on getting capital to start a trade wagon or something like that. Hopefully, I can manage to carve out a niche to at least have a decent time in this world. Was also hoping to find my army’s old encampment for something but I... kinda got lost. They kind of rushed me out before I could finish learning navigation. Also, no map so double whammy there.”

“But why? I thought you had an entire bar! You weren’t dumb enough to go against my advice, were you?”

“What the— of course not! I don’t have it because of the, fucking—” Lawrence winced just before he could explain why he lost the bar. “Look. I have to get this thing moving to get out of here before things get too dark. I don’t know how well you demon types hear, but I’m also going to need you to stay quiet in case we run into anything. Fair?” Another fair point. Miriel nodded, the best option to get things moving without jumping to another topic. With a nod in response, Lawrence trudged to the front of the wagon and sat in the driver’s seat, before whipping the horses forward.

Though the drive was bumpy, Miriel forced herself to suffer in silence in the back of the wagon as Lawrence kept the wagon moving. She was simultaneously grateful for his assistance yet also furious that she’d been reduced to this.

\* \* \*

Hours passed, and through the back of the wagon Miriel could see the journey she made with her more-than-responsible savior. The bumpiness of that wretched, white and red battlefield eventually gave way to a smooth road, which Lawrence immediately lead the horses onto. Soon, the rolling mounds of wreckage gave way to idyllic, if suspiciously quiet forests. If nothing else, Miriel was at least thankful for the relatively smoother road, at least compared to the field.

It was strange, sitting and waiting like this. She'd always preferred to keep herself busy between various little projects; infiltrating various social occasions, keeping a tab on certain major social affairs, bouncing between various different engagements to keep a social web going wherever it was she visited. But sitting here in the wagon, waiting to either arrive somewhere or to get fixed, with Lawrence wordlessly sitting up on the driver's seat it just felt so...surreal. She wasn't working towards anything; she didn't even have a destination or plan for what to do. Oh wait, there was still that matter with the prince.

"Lawrence," Miriel asked, breaking the ice and hoping that they were far away enough from the battlefield to talk, "whatever is it that you intend to do with those weapons?" She couldn't delve into the prince matter immediately, she had to work into it.

"Those things? Honestly no clue. I was thinking of refurbishing them somehow and then selling them off. War panic is a hell of a thing for trafficking weapons."

"Really now? That's your plan? You're going to be a scavenger and weapon merchant?"

"Well, it'll serve as capital to get me going."

"That's it then? Aren't you...at all concerned about certain infernal invasions and the like? I imagine you'd have some stake in humanity's survival and all that."

"Oh please Miri," Lawrence answered, "I've said it already but I could care less what happens, on a national scale anyways. Even then you say that as if they haven't been able to keep them at bay before I got here for however long it's been." He was right there, she had to give him credit. For as long as she could remem-

ber, things between man, the infernal, and the undead have always been at an impasse at best, and a destructive draw for all involved at worst.

“True, but it’s always with heavy casualties—”

“And despite that they manage to rebuild just in time for the next wave to cross. I’ve done my research on the matter, and I’ve concluded that I really don’t care. Not that there’s much I can do anyways. If they can hold things for the last thousand years, then they can hold it for another sixty or however long it takes me to croak of old age. End of story.” Ever a free spirit, it seemed. Before she had the opportunity to pop the question about the prince, Lawrence suddenly hushed his voice down, muttering under his breath. “Wait, there’s someone ahead, he looks—wait, no way. No fucking way. It can’t be.” Lawrence brought the wagon to an abrupt halt, nearly throwing Miriel out of her seat.

“What? What?” Miriel whispered back.

“Follow my lead. HEY! FATHER!” Lawrence suddenly shouted out. From outside of the wagon there was a voice, an older one, one bearing a Theocratic refinement to it.

“Ah, Oh! Good son Lawrence! My word, bless the Goddess for this fortuitous reunion! How ever did you manage to escape the slaughter?”

“I could ask the same for you,” Lawrence deflected. Must have not wanted to talk about it. “I assume it has to do with that *holy virtue* of yours huh?”

“Yes...? I’ve no clue why you said that aloud but yes, my prayers kept me safe from those devils. Is something the matter?”

“Just making sure your strengths are still all well and good! Tis good to know how strong you are against the infernal, good Father!” Ah, there it was.

“I must say Lawrence, you seem to be in an awful jovial mood! Why, it used to be that you’d visibly darken whenever I talked to you but you’re absolutely beaming!”

“Ach, well, I used to. That sordid business is nothing compared to what I’ve experienced in that bloodbath though. Why



I dare say that my faith has been sparked anew in the duty that I've been selected for!" The father, tried to give another praise to that, but Lawrence was quick to speak over him. "Father! You ought to climb in the back, I'm moving away from this horrid place to regroup with whatever yet remains elsewhere."

"Yes, yes, of course! The road will be more easily traveled upon wagon, let us go forth!"

Dastardly Lawrence, very dastardly. Content to let her prey come to her directly, Miriel tenderly (as tenderly as she could, with consideration to her leg) moved herself closer towards the back end of the wagon. If Lawrence's warning held any water, then that priest would be able to repel her and she'd never be able to get close enough to drain him. She didn't have the strength to freely shift forms with her wounds, so a disguise was automatically out of the question. But if she took him by surprise by grabbing him as he boarded the back and tore out his throat before he could start reciting lines from that book of his...

Yes, this could work. Lawrence had managed to plan the perfect ambush for an easy meal. If she did this right, she could devour the priest and dump out of the wagon within seconds. Positioned behind the fabric, she was prepared to hoist up her upcoming victim to their death.

"Yes, hop right on board Father!" Lawrence encouraged the priest. "I tell you we'll be back home before you know it and wait-whyAREYOUCLIMBINGUPHERE?!" Curses! Even now Miriel could hear the struggle up at the driver's seat of someone trying to climb up onto the driver's seat.

"Why, I want to sit up in front with you, good son Lawrence!" The priest replied. "It's only right as your spiritual trainer that I be by your side on this journey." The priest, an older looking man with greying hair, sat by Lawrence in the driver's seat, and in short order, looked into the back. The absolute, worst-case scenario. "By the Goddess! Lawrence!" The old priest started shaking Lawrence by the shoulder.

"Gah, what, what?" Lawrence asked. He looked into the back, facing Miriel and his face quickly dropped to shock, worry,

and surprise. “Wha— Oh! Je— uh Goddess! When’d she get there?!” Damn it Lawrence! You opportunist! With no other option Miriel attempted to throw herself to the front of the wagon, anything to try to strike at the priest before he could present that cursed icon of his! No luck, her leg quickly gave out and she fell to the floor of the wagon, and her tail was still thoroughly defanged, and useless as ever.

The natural path of things occurred, the priest presented his symbol and spoke a repelling word of power, forcing Miriel to shield herself with her arms from the radiance before her. She crawled backwards, trying to reach the back exit of the wagon as the priest dismounted the driver’s seat and moved into the back with her. “Lawrence! To me! We must exorcise this demon! Now! While she’s weakened!”

“I mean, uh, I— yeah! Absolutely Father! Just let me, get this uh, thing here...” The priest was slowly bearing down on Miriel, who slowly kept crawling backwards.

She really hoped that she wouldn’t have to fall out of the cart for a second time today.

“Goddess protect us,” the priest chanted, “for while we walk amongst the dead, we shall be protected within and witho— URK!” All at once, the radiance was snuffed out, Lawrence had a hand over the priest’s mouth, and another at his back, likely with what had to be a knife. The priest reached up to dislodge whatever was in his back, to no avail as Lawrence slapped his hand away, keeping him restrained. Miriel moved to take advantage of the situation, slowly dragging herself back up to stand as the priest struggled in Lawrence’s grasp. It wasn’t long before she had sunk her fangs into the old man’s neck and began to suck the priest’s bright, vibrant soul, which quickly worked its way up from his chest and to Miriel’s maw.

When it finally touched her lips, Miriel felt that same overwhelming sense of euphoria that could only come from a faithful soul. A life such as this was an utter treat that only came rarely. Just from a mere shard of it, Miriel could feel the wound in her leg healing, the crossbow bolt gyrating painlessly in her wound

before being forcefully ejected from her body. The pain washed away from her like a wave, eventually working its way to the end of her tail where a brand new tailhead erupted from the stump with a spray of blood; good as new and ready to kill.

As the priest's soul was drained from him, Lawrence leaned into the old man's free ear, and growled, "This is for taking my bar, you son of a bitch." From those last muttered words, it was only seconds later that the priest was dead, devoid of the spirit that pervaded his body. Seconds after that, his body was dumped unceremoniously out the back, and the wagon was once again on its way.

"Feeling better?" Lawrence asked from his driver seat.

"Yes, as best as I've ever been." Miriel responded. Her chest still thumped with the false vestiges of a good life stolen, she'd be fine for quite a while. Only, now there was the dual fury of being forced to endure a bumpy wagon with a crossbow wound...and of that bothersome ordeal with the prince. She moved through the wagon and joined Lawrence in the front seat, forgoing any disguise to better express her up and coming anger at him. "Though I believe I'd feel slightly better if I didn't have a blasted *crossbow bolt* in my leg in the first place!" Lawrence threw his hands up in frustration from the renewed hostility.

"Gee, I'm sorry Miri! I guess I was just *supposed* to know that that was you that was trying to sneak up on me, and not some *other* demonic *fuck* that—" Lawrence reeled his excitement back, physically recoiling as he worked to calm himself down. "Miri, it's obvious to me that we've both had somewhat of an eventful day. I'm going to quit talking for now, and focus on trying to find a place to stay for the night before it gets to be freezing out. Hopefully, by the time I find something we can both, just, chill the *fuck* out. Because my heart is beating a mile a fucking minute." He looked over, his frustrated glare meeting her own. "Deal?"

"Deal." Miriel concurred. Lawrence turned back to the road as the demoness was essentially left to her own thoughts again, arms crossed over one another in a pouty display. He did have a point with being a bit high strung. Escaping from a massacre,

let alone getting revenge on someone in such a gruesome way, did tend to have the excitement of getting someone worked up. Maybe she was being too hard on him.

A minute of silence passed between the two, with not a word said.

"...Man, kinda crazy I had to kill my dad." Lawrence idly recounted.

"What?" Miriel replied, taken off guard.

"My dad. Y'know, my father."

"Your...father."

"Well. The Father. I mean." Lawrence looked over to his companion again. "Y'know because he's the only father I've ever known in...this...world I mean."

"...hm."

"Yeah, it, sounded funnier in my head." He turned back to the road, diverting his attention away from the conversational equivalent to dumping a dead rat on the table. "Was just trying to, I dunno, calm down, I guess." An awkward silence.

"...Was that a joke on the fact that man was a priest?"

"Yeah."

Neither of them thought to press the topic after that.

\* \* \*

"Stupid helmet," Lawrence grumbled, fiddling with the belt buckles that kept it secured. "Fucking thing's just stinging my face at this point." Every time he took a breath the chain would flow in and out, grazing his face with ice cold intensity. With a sigh, he eventually managed to free his head from the helmet's metallic grasp and threw it backwards into the wagon.

"Nice stubble." Miri quipped, still at his side. "Though I can't tell if you'd do better with a shave or not. The short hair does look good though."

"Thanks." Lawrence replied, feeling the slight sting of sarcasm. "Don't you feel a draft at all in that get up?" Miri looked down to her get up, that vague outfit of fur and cloth that seemed

barely fit to keep one warm in a castle ballroom, let alone a winter landscape.

“Oh please Lawrence. As a demon I’m simply created different to the likes of you.”

“Wonderful.” As he looked back to the road, he spotted a building in a small clearing besides the road, an inn or travel house if he ever saw one. Even with the potential shelter ahead of him, he still couldn’t deny the almost scandalous amount of pale, shapely leg in the corner of his vision now that his helmet was off. What’s worse was just how close she was, he could barely move his arm without bumping it into her she was so close. What was she even still doing here? What was her game...

“Looks like a place to stay up ahead,” Lawrence pointed out, hoping to distract himself from the hole in his chest. He couldn’t fall for it, she was a seductress, plain and simple. He’d be stupid to fall for such a thing. “Don’t suppose you got anything to pay with in case they want money? I’m kinda broke.”

“We can deal with it as we need to.” Miri responded flatly. In short order, Lawrence maneuvered towards the building before parking it, along with the horses, within a stable. Miri, in the meantime, took to shifting her form to Father Verman, a development that would have been uncanny had Lawrence not immediately moved past her. Opening the door to the tavern, the inside was empty save a few scattered tables and chairs with their own lanterns, a sight familiar to Lawrence from his arrival in this world.

“Place seems empty.” Lawrence stated to the demoness besides him. “We ought to look around in case there’s another person around. See if we have to pay or...” He paused when he felt the presence just to his side disappear. When he looked, Miri was already gone, with not a single track to show where she went.

Naturally, Lawrence thought. Without many other options, he drew his sword and took a step into the building. “Hello?” He called out, “Anyone home? If you’re a demon or something, please leave because I’m not going to put up with it tonight!” Stepping further in, he quickly grabbed a spare chair and placed

it in front of the door, still worried for any ambushes. There was the first floor, an eatery and bar, and a second floor, lined with several private rooms, all of them empty.

“Don’t bother looking,” Miri interrupted, barging into the building lacking a disguise, “Found all the patrons, probably the owner too.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, sacrificed and gutted in the woods. As demons are wont to do.” Ah.

“Oh, great. Don’t suppose any of your kind’s still...”

“No, long gone. The bodies were long frozen over.”

“Good enough.” Changing the focus of his search to drinks, Lawrence made his way to the bar, and from a superficial glance, cursed at its scarce availability. Miri took a seat across from him as he leaned down to take in the selection.

“Anything good?” Miri asked in a very exasperated tone.

“Well, there isn’t much. There’s a couple of ales here, lot of it already tapped though, there’s also some random hard spirits here...”

“Is there any wine?” Miri asked snappily.

“There’s a bottle here but it’s not Taganair.”

“Hand me the bottle and a glass.” When Lawrence looked back up to Miri, she was visibly impatient, and moreover frustrated with something. Something that likely had to do with her sudden thirst for alcohol. Seeing no other course for the conversation, Lawrence obliged her request and put the bottle of wine and a mug for her to use. “Thank you.” As he leaned back down to serve himself, Lawrence heard the uncorking of the bottle and a long, drawn out pour of wine within the tankard.

Lawrence quickly settled on a cask of ale and brought it to the counter along with a mug to use. Quickly filling up, he could only watch as Miri took a, drawn out drink of her wine. Something was obviously eating her up.

“Something up Miri?” Lawrence consoled, walking back to Miri’s side of the bar. “You seem uncharacteristically out of it. Something happen out there you were dealing with?”

“Yes, getting shot in the thigh with a crossbow.”

“C’mon, you were out there for a reason, and probably trying to clamber onto a wagon for a reason. Beyond the crossbow incident, what happened?”

“Ugh,” Miri scoffed, likely from how obvious she was being. She took hold of the wine bottle and poured herself another refill. “I was looking for someone.”

“Hm, I assume they were someone important.”

“Not really.” Miri sighed, attempting to downplay her goal. “I doubt you’d know him anyways.”

“Oh come on Miri.” Lawrence sat down at a chair besides her, taking a moment to enjoy his drink. “I thought we knew each other enough to not hide such minor things from one another. Knowing you, you wouldn’t waste your time on some small fry soldier or sergeant. You’re not one to put yourself at risk for nothing, after all.” Miri set down the wine glass and turned her body towards Lawrence, glaring the whole while. She was getting upset that her own game was being used against her.

“If you keep pushing this, Lawrence, I will gut you and leave you out in the snow while I finish my beverage. And let me remind you that my tail is perfectly fine and that you are less than arm’s length distance from me.” Her tail swayed side to side above her head, adding to her threat. A worrying display, but what may be a harmless one considering she’s wasted her one threat about his throat earlier. Despite his outwardly calm appearance, drilled in from the sights he had seen and the brutality he had endured with training, his mind was a race with thoughts on his companion.

She could have left at any point after draining Verman, she didn’t have to tag along or to be accompanying him like this. What was she after? Couldn’t be seduction, she’d been standoffish this whole time and she wouldn’t need to worry about turning him away from his “duty.” Was she perhaps biding her time, waiting for a precise moment to kill him? Was there something she wanted out of him? But the problem there is, again,

the standoffishness, she'd surely know as a manipulator that a honey approach is better than vinegar.

But maybe that was part of her game...she knew the sultry approach wouldn't work on him, so she'd get directly to the point. Considering how open he'd been in the past, why wouldn't she? Was there something else to it, some baser desire? No, no he couldn't let himself fall for something like that. Lawrence pushed the thought from his head. If she were looking for someone specific that was important, he'd have to try and figure things out. He could count the amount of people important enough to be on that battlefield on two hands, way too many to try and guess at.

He'd clearly had to press her somehow to find out more. Then he'd be able to try and piece things together.

"Fine then, I won't pry. I imagine you'd enjoy hearing about my problems instead." She didn't say anything, and merely turned back to her drink on the bar. That wasn't a no.

"Well," Lawrence leaned back, thinking of how to keep it short and sweet, if only to try and keep the ice broken. Maybe he could utilize his position to get a bit more out of her. "There was the bar thing which, turned up aces, honestly. No suspicion, no indictments, nothing, it was airtight! And if I do say so myself it went pretty well all things considered. Struggled a bit with contacts though, as you can imagine." He let himself have a chuckle, reminiscing at his own success after Miri's intervention. "Though...it didn't last for very long."

"That priest, Verman, showed up, spouting a bunch of crap about destiny and chosen one stuff and blah blah blah. I threw him out and didn't think anything of it. Then, I don't know how he did it but he then got my bar confiscated from me." Miri gave him a sidelong glance, clearly the topic had picked up. "Next thing I knew I was being given an ultimatum; either shape up and go out and fight willingly or get clinked up and essentially brainwashed about my duty by a religious freak. I naturally went with the former because I've seen cult documentaries and that'd basically be the ego death of me."



“So serve,” Miri interjected, “or be forced to serve...” She took another sip of her drink. The way she hung on the words were telling, he’d found a point!

“Yeah. Didn’t even do a good job shaping me up anyways. Physical training certainly helped but you can only push someone for so long before they break. Ugh, and the constant sermons I had to listen to! I swear I can recite the first paragraph of their book just from trying to drone it out. Anyway, like a month or two after this, that big old demonic push started, and I got shipped out. Was basically given a regiment or something, I was apparently a figure head, so I don’t really know but even *that* didn’t last long.”

“Oh? What happened?”

“Well, the battle started, giant phantasmal skull hit us and that was one half gone. Uuuh then some spectral bitch screamed at us and knocked the other half down. Naturally, I said, ‘fuck that’ and ran. Found a wagon for transporting the dead away and now I’m here! Basically, I’m off the leash and looking forward to running the ranges. Cool story huh?” Lawrence took a drink to give Miri space to respond, as well as to gauge her response. She was invested in the conversation again, her exasperation wasn’t as poignant now, but it was still present. He could see something in her eyes, a look of hope and curiosity.

“That’s very unfortunate to hear Lawrence. But I assume you didn’t see much of the battlefield?”

“Not...everything per se, But I *did* interact with a lot of people during my time at the war camp. Lots of important, big wigs who do nothing but talk of political affairs!” Lawrence fibbed. A risky maneuver, lying like this, but one that he could take from being honest with her so much.

“I see. I don’t suppose you happened to be involved with planning how the battle went at all did you?”

“Oh yeah, of course! Ah, I was actually supposed to...” Should he overstate his role in the battle? “Uh y’know, be at the center of everything. But, that kind of went out the window, along with everybody else in the formation.”

“So you saw where everybody was on the field, yes?”

“I think I recognized some banners and what not yes.”

“Then...” Miri shifted in her seat, either out of discomfort or potential excitement. “Would you happen to know where the prince had gotten to?”

The prince? Oh, oh dear. Lawrence did know about the prince. “The prince? Why he must be who you’re looking for then.”

“I need to have a few words with him, to make sure he’s alright.” Miri admitted. So there it was! She was looking for information on someone she was probably working on, either to impersonate, or to seduce. Probably seduce, considering her care for his being.

“Well, depending on how you look at it, I actually do have news.” Miri’s face instantly lit up with surprise at the response.

“Is he alive?” She leaned in close, as if trying to receive the words more expediently. “Did you see him flee elsewhere? Which direction? Did his guard stay behind to cover his retreat?” Such energy was certainly new for her. A shame he had to dash it back to dust.

“No.” Lawrence softly answered. “He’s...dead. I saw it happen—”

“What happened? Did he get buried under something? Did you see his body? Was it obliterated into nothing?”

“Right after my regiment dropped dead, I turned to run, but I did spy the prince engaging with a big bulbous demon. Big, fat, beige skin, jagged horns out of his head.” As he delivered his report, Miri’s face sank deeper and deeper into despair. “Right, the thing grabbed him by an ankle, hoisted him up to eye level, next thing I see is the prince’s head on fire. I can only assume he didn’t survive that stunt.” Miri sat there frozen for a second, obviously trying to process the news, and wasn’t doing well.

“Did...did anyone else see it?” Obviously looking for a reason or excuse to say he *didn’t* in fact die and merely got separated. So much for seduction.

“I can only assume everyone on the field saw it. Oh, and I could hear the thing shouting about how he had killed him so any survivors would definitely know.” What happened next could only be described as a complete breakdown of Miri’s usually cool façade.

Mimicking Lawrence from before, Miri threw her hands into the air, shouting in frustration as she brought them crashing back down onto the bar. “DAMNABLE GLUTTON!” She shouted, her voice cracking in frustration. “I told him, I *told him* to leave him alive failing that, to at *least* not make a big deal of his death!” Lawrence was taken aback at the outburst. This was...new. He remembered that demons were more passionate, sure, but all those teaching on their mannerisms hadn’t prepared him for this. “He had to have gotten that missive and seen it. He wouldn’t have made such a proclamation if he hadn’t! That fat, bulbous *bastard!* How does he expect anyone to make any progress anywhere if he keeps *ruining it?!?*” Miri tried to take a sip from her mug, but once she discovered it was empty, instead took to drinking the wine directly from the bottle.

The outburst here reminded Lawrence of Miri’s problem with succubi and the complications they created. She was annoyed by it sure, but he’d never seen her this angry over something. Something else was at play here, but what? “Sounds like he ruined a bit of a pet project you were working on.” Lawrence observed. He hoped such a minor point would allow her to expand, that is, if she wasn’t too angry for it. She put down the bottle and leaned heavily against the bar, one arm supporting her head as she looked over to Lawrence.

“That fat bastard ruined it utterly. I was trying to make that do-good prince fall to depravity to show the kingdoms that even the best amongst them can be tempted. Failing that, I was *going* to impersonate him so that I could at least sow chaos from within! Except now I can’t even do that because he just *had* to declare,” she raised up her arms and looked towards the sky, “just *had* to declare to the Goddess and every other god that he had killed the cretin!” She fell back down into a heap, not even interested in her

wine as she knocked away the bottle, forcing Lawrence to catch it before it could spill.

She kept talking, but Lawrence wasn't listening at this point. She could go on as much as she liked, so long as it helped her calm down and get all the frustration out. It gave him another moment to think.

It was certainly an ambitious plan, either causing the prince to fall to demoralize a kingdom or impersonating him to do some damage from the inside. But it didn't make sense. Was she usually trying to pull these grand schemes? No, if she was so content to advance her kind's agenda, why would she get frustrated by succubi encroaching on her turf? She'd be helping them avoid the witch hunters if that was the case! And to expect cooperation from another when she'd be doing that, what a hypocrite! As he thought on his conversation with her at Tarrant's old bar, Lawrence picked up on something, a detail of the conversation he had overlooked in his own despair. A give-away that Miri had either accidentally or purposefully given to him. That idea...

But it just had to be manner of speaking! There's no way she'd give away something so personal!

Unless...

"A bit odd Miri," Lawrence declared, preparing to paint a portrait of the demoness with the frame given to him. "I didn't take you for being a team player amongst your kind." Miri slowly turned to face him, her eyes glaring at him in a terrifying similar manner to when he had learned her name. He had to be careful, going out on thin ice like this.

"Excuse me?" She growled. She raised a hand, and very violently transformed it into a wicked claw, with bird like talons and sharp, deadly looking talons. It was exactly what he was afraid of; he had accidentally made it sound like a tease!

He'd taken a dangerous risk, and he could practically hear the ice cracking beneath his feet as he felt her fury being directed at him! In this situation, she was likely ready to kill him at the drop of a hat. While he'd be able to put up a fight, his sword wasn't drawn, and she could more than easily overwhelm him up close

like this. Even dropping the topic would be a dangerous proposition. She'd probably only be encouraged to take his head to make up for the failure in whatever it was she was doing!

Lawrence would have to choose his words with exceptional care and make his claim with an exact choice of words; the only way out was through. He had to take the risk with his guess!

"Don't take that as an insult or a tease, Miri. It's, merely an observation I've made from talking with you. You seem much more free-spirited than some of your other brethren. Free spirited and prideful. Not knowing better, I'd say you...didn't have a choice in certain matters." Lawrence paused, choosing to let the claim hang in the air and to await a reaction. He didn't get one immediately, Miri's talon was still poised ready to gut him, her tail aimed directly at his head, as seemed routine for the appendage. But, practically imperceptible to anyone not looking for it, he saw it. The slight release of tension in her hand; relaxation.

He had his portrait.

"Whatever gave you that impression?" She asked in a low tone.

"You strike me as an individualistic type of demon Miri. You prefer to be on your own, and despise working with others, unless they're helping you with your goals or just entertaining you. Like with me at the town, or the bar, or that old guy, whoever he was. You're not the kind to do things for some, greater order or whatever, at least not without something to gain from it yourself. It's why you've hidden your true name too, so that no one can ever tell you to do anything, if I'm remembering that brief thing on demonology correctly." As Lawrence continued, he could see her tensing up again, infuriated at being exposed and systematically unraveled in such a way. The mood of the room was tangibly changing to that of a storm, one that threatened to snuff out his life in its gales. He had to push, push to the very end!

"When those succubi showed up at the town, you tried to get them killed by the witch hunters instead of helping them. While they did attack you, the fact you were trying to kill each other

shows me that you were at odds with them, but that's hardly the most telling part of what you've shown me. Back at the bar, you mentioned something to me when I was wallowing in despair at my situation. You mentioned," Lawrence paused, nervously licking his lips as his confidence paused. What if he was wrong? No, he was at the end. He couldn't stop here. "You mentioned that you had an idea of what I was going through." Miri slowly let her claw drop to the bar, and Lawrence could see her eye lids shifting at some inner turmoil within her.

Bingo. Just one more gamble...

"It wasn't your choice to seek out the prince to corrupt him. Hell, devouring that entire village wasn't your choice either, was it?" For a tense few seconds, the air inside the room was still. The words hung motionless in the air as Lawrence finished his oration, not knowing if he would be fighting for his life in the next few moments, facing a harsh repudiation, or just watching Miri walk out the door in offense.

When Miri sighed, lifting herself from the counter and returning her hand back to its normal form, it was as if the entire building sighed, a great exhalation of pent-up energy. "Want to talk about it?" Lawrence questioned.

"..You should have become a witch hunter, Lawrence. Your social insight and deduction skills are wasted on a battlefield. You're correct. The long and the short of it is that, unlike my many peers, I'm actually noteworthy and as such the High Demon Lord has, on occasion, asked for my services for specific tasks. The village was because he needed attention drawn...elsewhere, apparently. And the latest blunder he's forced upon me was to either corrupt or impersonate the prince to perform whatever acts I see fit to advance his agenda."

"Can't you just refuse his orders? Or is there a thing with hierarchies or something that I'm missing?"

"You have the right of it. The High Lord's position of influence is wide and powerful. To deny it would be suicide. He didn't claim that title by being weak, after all."

"Is there literally any way to circumvent it? Say you're busy

doing something else worthwhile for whatever dumb nation building thing he's doing?"

"There is, but it'd have to be a solid excuse, and I'd have to actually show something for it."

"Sounds like you're between a rock and a hard place. A place you don't want to be in."

"Just about." Like a dying fire, the conversation sputtered out, and the room grew colder as the two strangers returned to their own thoughts. Miri went back to looking over her wine, never quite working up the strength to refill her glass as she seemed to broil with inner thought. Lawrence took an idle sip of his ale, his tongue alight from the flat, hoppy taste. He was at the bottom of his drink, with nothing but his reflection in the booze to accompany him, it seemed.

So she was individualistic, she had what she wanted, at least, what she needed, for information. Why was she still here? What more could she possibly...?

No.

No more of this tripe. If Lawrence didn't know better, he was turning into Miri. Always talking with another motive in mind, always carefully weighing what words to say next. He had to do it to get by training with those damnable Theocrats, he'd done it with Miri to get by...but why even bother with that anymore? The throbbing pit in his chest couldn't help but agree.

"Miri," Lawrence started softly, grabbing the wine bottle. "I'm going to speak plainly. I think we've both been speaking with more than a hint of suspicion on our minds. Trying to, I don't know, navigate our little tangled web of speech and desire, crafting a picture of the person before us while carefully trying to hide our own hands."

"Well..." Miri responded. Her demeanor was that of fatigue and defeat, a sullen face from the outburst.

"I remember you mentioned you liked one of our first conversations where we just...talked. How about we go back to something like that?" Lawrence poured the demoness another serving of wine, using it to keep the mood calm even as the wind be-

gan to pick up outside. “No lying, no thinking about what every little given word means, no trying to figure out the other. Let’s just talk. Lord knows how much manipulation we’ve been up to otherwise.” Lawrence finished pouring Miri’s drink, who took a moment to stare at it before taking another sip.

“Your terms are acceptable Lawrence. What do you want to talk about?”

“I...actually don’t know.” Lawrence admitted, shifting uncomfortably in his seat. “That’s the downside of this little deal...Wait, I think I have one. Don’t you ever...get lonely, going as you do?”

“You mean constantly moving about?” Miri asked.

“No, more like, putting on a fake personality for every new person you meet. Don’t you ever occasionally just shoot the shit with others of your kind? Just have a good time chatting about things without putting on a front or something?”

“Ugh, I almost wish. They’re either so far in their own ‘grandness,’” she emphasized by cocking her fingers up and down, “that they can’t stop thinking of themselves. Or they’re so lost in the greater designs of the High Lord that they refer to everything by rank. God, Lawrence,” Miri turned to her newly christened confidant, “Am I losing my touch? You managed to read me so completely I can’t help but think that I’m losing it.”

“I, mean,” Lawrence stuttered, unsure of the new direction Miri presented, “I’d heard that demons were more...passionate about things, and you’re the infiltrator type. I wouldn’t be too shocked if some traits of being a person rubbed off onto you.”

“Oh, Lawrence!” Miri turned away and cradled her head in her hands in frustration. “Don’t say that! You’re just proving my point! I’m losing my edge and that proves it!”

“There’s nothing wrong with referring to yourself as a person Miri. It’s not like it’s a humanity only thing!”

But it’s always how the Theocracy refers to it to you mortals! Demons and the like are always some...other.” Miri continued on in her tirade about the word person, and Lawrence, shamefully, let his attention drift off in the conversation. Miri



was rapidly becoming more vibrant and, however strange it may sound, alive. Her expression was lively, and she actually seemed somewhat jovial, with a genuine smile that actually used the muscles near her eyes. “This is...actually amazing Lawrence.” Miri declared. “I feel so free being able to just talk like this, not having to worry about anything! No stories to maintain, no fronts to keep up, nothing.”

“Mm.” Lawrence hummed, taking another drink of his ale. “Good to hear.” Miri, as if reacting to Lawrence’s energy, quickly calmed down and took a brief moment to take a sip from her drink. For a while, they tended to themselves, enjoying and re-filling their drinks as they saw fit while shooting the occasional glance to one another. As if expecting the other to take the next leap.

He wasn’t trying to be dismissive, but he didn’t know what to say anymore. There was still one thought, that worry about Miri’s situation. The only problem was that he didn’t know if he really had the stones to say it. It was a big risk, after all, one his heart probably wouldn’t be able to take.

“Lawrence,” Miri called, placing a hand on his arm, “I was...wondering about something.”

“What would that be?” Lawrence nervously asked.

“I was...thinking back on my little situation...and I think I may have a solution of some kind to it.”

“You mean the excuse thing?” Miri nodded. “Yeah, I was...thinking of something about that myself. What’d you have in mind?”

“Well,” Miri shifted in her seat, nervous about whatever it was she was going to propose. “There’s one exception to having to respond to the High Lord’s demands, and that’s by being in a pact with someone. Because of certain rules involved in the process, if I get into a pact with someone I don’t need to worry about his orders and demands. I think you’re noteworthy enough to qualify for it as well..”

“So, you’re thinking of a pact?”

“Yes, we know each other enough so it shouldn’t be a big deal. I was thinking...” As if trying to finish Miri’s sentence, Lawrence spoke at the same time as her.

“I become your thrall?” Lawrence questioned.

“I’d become your minion—” Miri finished.

“What?!” They both shouted, turning to one another. “I could never—”

Lawrence raised his hand, stopping the mirrored conversation. “I’ll start,” Lawrence stated firmly. “I don’t know the big things about that pact thing, but...I’d be willing to take a risk with it. I don’t know if you’d have to force me to do anything, but I trust you enough not to. Not like I’m going to be doing anything major in the meantime.”

“Lawrence, no.” Miri scolded. “By becoming my thrall you’d be tied to me, in life and death. At least if I were your minion you wouldn’t need to worry about me getting you in trouble. And, likewise, I trust you enough to not to call me like some dog on a leash.”

“Miri,” Lawrence reached out, mirroring Miri by putting his hand on her arm. “I’d...” Lawrence broke his gaze, unable to handle what he was about to say. He almost pondered the consequences of saying something so stupid but pushed it away. He had an agreement to honor. “...I’d be lying if I said I hadn’t thought of you, on occasion. Wondering about how you’ve been doing, or what you’ve been up to. Worrying about you is almost a pastime for me at this point. It’s one of the few things that kept me remotely sane during that boot camp.” Lawrence’s face started to burn up from embarrassment, having admitted to such an intimate thought.

“...I feel the same way.” Miri admitted. She reached over with her other hand and physically dragged Lawrence’s gaze back towards her own. “Ever since that first conversation, I’d been thinking about what to say the next time we met. From, talking about your world, to maybe how things were going...I’ve always been looking forward to an opportunity to talk to you like that again. Just two strangers conversing about whatever we wanted.”

“Hm,” Lawrence chuckled. “Looks like my thing about strangers sticking together stuck, huh?”

“More than either of us know, I think.” Miri responded. For a moment, they just looked to one another, staring deeply into one another’s gaze. Lawrence himself gazing into what seemed like red rubies in Miri’s eyes, and Miri staring at hazel, wooded colored gems in Lawrence’s.

Neither of them knew who initiated it, one or the other leaning forward as the other unconsciously reciprocated their movements. For a moment, their lips touched in quick, experimental peck, before reconnecting once again in a slower movement. The two indulged in one another, freely tasting their beverages of choice in each other’s mouths as they began to wrap each other in a shared embrace. For the briefest moment, it was pure bliss, but one that was quickly dissipating with the rising pulse of excitement and passion. Eventually, they pulled away from one another, each granting the other a moment of reprieve and the opportunity to speak honeyed words.

“Miri,” Lawrence breathlessly started, “As crazy as it sounds, I don’t want us to be strangers to one another anymore.” He cupped Miri’s cheek in his hand, softly feeling her smooth, chilly skin even through a leathered and mailed hand. She held up her own hand, using it to softly grasp Lawrence’s as she looked longingly at him. Yet another face Lawrence hadn’t seen to her.

“Please,” Miri answered, “call me Miriel.”

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The atmosphere of the upstairs room was dark, but steamy and intimate, even with the windstorm outside blustering snow all about. Inside there was naught but the heaving chests of two momentary lovers, their breathes coming out as clouds of steamy mist as they fought to reclaim their breath by each other’s side.

Miriel shifted in her spot in bed, turning to her side from her back as she calmed down from the fling with Lawrence.

Such an activity wasn’t new to her, seduction was one of the

simplest ways to make fools vulnerable. Ordinarily, when someone declared that they wanted to make love with her, she didn't feel anything; it was a means to an end, after all. Not this time. For the first time, Miriel had felt something deeper than the base satisfaction typical lovemaking brought. It was a burning sensation that felt like gentle, floating sparks, or fiery butterflies in her chest. A lightness she couldn't explain accompanied with a fierce sense of satisfaction. She brought her hand to her chest, as if trying to reach inside herself to find what the sensation was. Is this what those bards would always sing about, or that those succubi would stir in the hearts of man?

She shifted her body further, trying to find a comfortable spot in the bed and beneath the covers as she tried to think. Lawrence's hand reached over from behind, resting gently across her belly. "Miri," Lawrence whispered, a hint of desperation present, "wait."

"Yes?" Miriel responded.

"I think I might have to call it that favor." A slight stir of worry writhed in Miriel's heart.

"What do you mean?"

"Miri, I want you to stay for the night. I don't care if you leave in the morning, but I insist. Please, just...stay with me."

"Lawrence..." Miriel softly whispered, attempting to comfort the man.

"Miri, you have no idea how lonely I've been. Ever since I showed up in this world, I haven't been able to connect to a single person. There were no guys to be able to laugh and be merry with, and no girls who were remotely worth the trouble of pursuing or trying to get sweet with. You're the only person I've been able to make any meaningful connection with. I just..." Lawrence moved in closer, putting his chest to Miriel's back as her tail maneuvered beneath his body to avoid being crushed, "I just want to spend a little more time with you."

Such desperation was usually entertaining to see, but with Lawrence, it stirred something else; that floating feeling again. Miriel gave a soft chuckle as she brought her arm over her

shoulder and behind her back to hug Lawrence around his neck. "Lawrence, you should know better than to waste a favor. Especially not after such an embarrassing confession like that~," she teased. "Didn't your mother ever warn you about girls like me?"

"Maybe," Lawrence responded. "Maybe I just find you too interesting to let go of. Maybe I'm into a woman like you. You'll stay?"

"Of course, I will, Lawrence. But only if you'll answer a question of mine about humans."

"Shoot."

"Lawrence, is this what love feels like? That strange, burning thing that musicians speak about losing to tragedy or another man or something or another?"

"Perhaps, but those guys are usually losers about that sort of thing anyways. Does it get worse when I do this?" He leaned down and began to plant kisses on the demoness's nape and shoulder, causing her to squeal from the affection.

"Stop it~! Honestly Lawrence, this is so embarrassing!"

"Is it worse? Yes or no?"

"Yes!" Lawrence withdrew from his assault, obviously happy with the response.

"Then yes, it is," he smugly responded.

"Well, in that case..." Miriel turned around in bed, putting her face to face with her apparent lover. "You can expect me to bother you for a while longer than just tonight, then. I hope you don't mind mixing me drinks if we ever find the things needed for it~." The two took each other into another embrace, Miriel having the advantage of wrapping her tail around Lawrence's body like an infatuated python.

"Not at all," Lawrence responded, "Not at all."

## Epilogue

## Empty Words and Fiery Indictments in a Thawing Forest

Where the hell is she, she should be done by now.

“Ser Lawrence, I hope you understand the gravity of these crises that plague humanity.” The witch hunter chided.

The snow within the remote depths of the forest had finally begun to melt, the emerald grass beneath it rising to sprout new life with the arrival of early spring. Lawrence and Miri had been traveling through the more desolate parts of its interior when the hunter and his retinue caught up with them. The witch hunter’s retinue had taken Miri aside while the hunter himself, Fredrick, spoke with him personally, one-on-one.

“Yes yes, I know.” Lawrence deflected, hoping to start an argument to buy time. “Thalbolga’s horde was advancing and killed many and blah blah blah. You know that the bastard’s dead, which I played more than a substantial part in doing by hunting him down, right?” That was a half-lie. Thalbolga had found Lawrence and Miri when they finally managed to find the war camp that Lawrence was looking for. He’d managed to catch them out while Lawrence was carrying along a chest of coinage; what was supposed to be the army’s pay. He tried to burn Lawrence to ash, but that magic immunity was a hell of a thing to have. That, and the preternatural ability to chuck a magic sword directly at Thalbolga’s fat dome.

“That is true...” Fredrick conceded.

“Not to mention that the rest of his horde got all cleaned up by that general who actually knew what the hell he was doing. It’s a nonissue at this point! I’d be shocked if any other demon gets the moxie to try something like that after that little display.”

“That’s also true,” Fredrick conceded, “but there’s still certain other problems that may arise from liches and the machinations of the High Lord. There’s also certain matters that revolve around you that I and the rest of the Theocracy are worried about.”

“Oh do go on.” Lawrence encouraged, walking around the cart to check that everything was still in place.

“There’s the certain matter of your lack of presence with any military unit that was a part of the general’s effort. Having been a part of the campaign for a fair period of time I can say without doubt that morale was drastically low with your disappearance. Having at least the news of your survival would have done wonders with the troops’ confidence in their duty.”

“But they did it, right?”

“Yes...but there are other disturbing rumors that I’ve always been hearing.” The witch hunter followed Lawrence as he circled the wagon, idly checking and rechecking the harnesses for the new tarp he had fitted onto the wagon and making sure that the newly created pocket dimension within the wagon itself was still working. “For instance, there was the rumor that you’d been traveling in a wagon, hocking the weapons of the fallen to various peasant villages for coin, as well as scavenging old battlefields for valuables without consideration for the dead.”

“Mhm,” Lawrence hummed, thinking back to his time in the winter. It had been dirty work, digging up snow, offing lone and vulnerable undead, but it was also profitable. Any piece of the prince’s elite guard’s armor sold for a fortune with collectors and adventurers.

“There was also the accusation that the horses on said wagon were not exactly alive...nor dead, for that matter.” Fredrick stopped by the front of the wagon, where the two reanimated draft horses idly stood, completely still with those high-quality cloth covers still covering most of their bodies. After getting ambushed by Thalbolga, Lawrence discovered that the demon had, in fact, killed the horses on the wagon for some sick sport. He had a soft spot for them, and as such forced one of the imps following Thalbolga to revive them in exchange for his life, since he was too slow to join the rest of his pack in fleeing.

“I don’t know what to say about that,” Lawrence admitted, “I took advantage of some magics that eased some problems with traveling and beast care.”

“Finally, there’s one much more...disturbing rumor.” Fredrik admitted.

Listening to the knot in his stomach, Lawrence knew that the next rumor was going to be about his and Miri’s little escapades. He was genuinely at a loss for a lie to try and deflect with. Where the hell was Miri, it was just two other people with the Witch Hunter damn it! Maybe she *was* losing her touch.

“There are rumors that, in your travels and ware peddling, you’ve been traveling with one other acquaintance, who’s description has changed on no less than several occasions.”

While he had his sword, it’d take too long to draw, and there was no telling how fast the hunter was on the draw with that rapier of his.

“During and after your stays in different towns, you’d often apparently hire retainers to come along with you on your little caravan, who disappear mysteriously before you reach your next destination.”

He had a blackjack up his sleeve, which he could grab quickly, but it was awful small. If he missed he’d have to deal with the hunter drawing his rapier and potentially skewering him. He felt Fredrik approach him from behind, and turned to face him, his face grim. “I wish to hear it from you, what do you know of where these individuals may have gone?” Lawrence shrugged his shoulders.

“We kept getting harassed by remnants of Thalbolga’s army and bandits.” Lawrence denied. “Roads are too dangerous to stay long on so we had to leave them and keep moving.” The witch hunter, predictably, was not fooled.

“Ser Lawrence were it not for the nature of your presence, I would render judgment on you here and now. The evidence before me and the testimonies surrounding your activities have clearly shown me that you are falling victim to the insidious influence of the infernal powers.” Just as Lawrence thought to attempt to draw his blackjack to strike the hunter across the jaw, Miri, in all her infernal glory, silently dropped behind the hunter from above. She silently approached, carefully placing foot-



fall after footfall in the spots of the ground where the snow had melted to reveal dirt and grass. "I will be taking you back to the Theocracy so that you may be cleansed of your sins and so that you may finish your training as a Warrior of Her Light."

"Yes yes, I suppose that's what's only right huh?" Lawrence half-taunted.

"Sir," Miri spoke, assuming the gruff voice of one of the hunter's retinue, the brass covered woman, "we finished our interrogation of Ser Lawrence's companion."

"What have you discovered?" The hunter asked, not turning his head from Lawrence.

"She's clean. As far as we can tell there's nothing about her." The hunter's face, in an entertaining change, shifted to sheer incredulousness at the response.

"What?" The hunter shouted, turning on his heel. "What do you mea—" Lawrence did not hesitate to slide the blackjack from his sleeve and to immediately beam Fredrick across the back of his head. The hunter fell to the ground in a slump, allowing Lawrence to draw a dagger and to finish him off with a stab to the neck.

"Took you long enough." Lawrence scolded. He leaned down and immediately began to rifle through the hunter's belongings, hoping to find anything of value to hock later. "Find anything good?" Lawrence asked, assuming the reason for Miri's delay. The demoness joined him in short order in searching for valuables on the hunter's body.

"Ah, the usual for his kind. Bunch of charms, some gaudier than others, and silver swords."

"Full make or coated?"

"Lawrence, please, you should know this by now. Full make."

"Sweet!" Lawrence cheered, pumping his fist in the air. That was going to fetch a good price at a jeweler's. "We need to work on our presentation, by the way. Stories were that you, as my acquaintance, had your description change several times."

"How do you propose I fix it Lawrence?" Miri sighed.

"I don't know, maybe disguise as the idiots we pick up for a bit. That sort of thing. Also maybe eat less, that's apparently leaving too big a footprint."

"But don't you think a more lingering description would harm our guise?"

"I mean," Lawrence shrugged, finishing patting down the body, "I'm the only thing remaining constant so it's pretty much a given that they'll figure it out. Oh, hey, since I have the thought, how'd the chat with Aelaz go?"

"Ugh, same old same old," Miri answered, moving to gather the stockpile of goods she'd scavenged from the retinue. "'What are you doing? How are you advancing my reign? How's that situation with that hero?' That sort of thing."

"Did you tell him the Thalbolga thing was incidental?" Lawrence questioned, assisting his companion in organizing things within the wagon's pocket dimension.

"I did. Also told him that I think I succeeded in drawing you off your path, but I'd need to keep watching to make sure."

"Did he accept it?"

"He did. So long as he doesn't demand I corrupt you to do anything more I should be fine for the foreseeable future. Even then there's still the pact we can mull over if it comes to it."

"Good to hear." Chucking the last decorated rosary to the pile of other jewelry in their respective corner of the wagon, Lawrence made his way through the spacious interior. Walking past the wardrobe and bed and assorted crates of goods, he went through the other exit of the pocket dimension and emerged at the front of the wagon. Taking up the reins, the horses were quick to respond and moved without any encouragement. Turning the wagon back to the road, leaving the hunter's body behind him, he felt Miri mount the wagon beside him.

"Any plans where to go next?" Miri asked, choosing to lean playfully against her companion.

"I was thinking south," Lawrence answered, a smile taking shape. "I'm good to go anywhere, honestly. Anywhere we want."

# Crossed Wires

by /a/non

## I Installation

A bead of sweat ran down my cheek, and I realized the sun had decided for me that today was not a day for long distance walking. I gave a heaving grunt as I pulled my satchel off my shoulder, setting it gently onto the sand at my feet. It had grown pretty heavy over the past couple of weeks, and I wondered if the town I was heading toward to sell my finds hadn't moved since I last visited. I went through the bag's contents once more, counting all the pieces in my head and comparing the running list I kept to what was actually in the bag. All the important stuff – that is to say, valuable parts – were there. I triple checked the microchips and storage drives, confirming whether they were all still functional after rustling around in my bag and knocking into one another.

It was times like this that I really wished I could get my bike out of the impound, but until I sold these parts I wouldn't have enough money and there was no way anyone back home would take parts from me at anything resembling fair value. I took a few deep breaths, thankful for the shady spot I found next to the rotting remains of an old airship that had run aground some time during the war.

After taking a break for the afternoon I thought about whether I should try to scavenge the wreckage I was using for shelter. On the one hand, my bag was heavy enough, and the

components inside were surely more than valuable enough for me to get my bike back. On the other, if I put it off until I'd freed said bike, some other buzzard would get to dig around in here before I could – if one hadn't already, that was – and I'd miss out on some potentially valuable goods, or, even better, old military tech. That stuff fetched a pretty penny with both collectors and rebels, and it could also help me curry favor with one (or more, if I was clever) of the governments trying to establish a functional state.

I'd talked myself into it before I even finished that last thought. It was a D-class, so it wouldn't take me much time to pick it clean anyway. I'd cleaned out my fair share of these so, knowing my way around, I headed straight for the cockpit. There I found the controls and computers mostly intact, at least physically, and I pulled up my portable terminal to start digging around. The first thing I did was a basic systems check.

That's when I heard, just barely, the sound of footsteps. Had someone been in here the whole time? I drew my handgun and took cover behind the seat of the cockpit. I started sweating again – this time a cool one. I did my best to still my breathing and listened for any other noises.

To my surprise, I heard a female voice. "Captain, have you returned from your scouting mission? I've been guarding the ship for days."

Great. A dysfunctional military bot was not what I wanted to deal with today. I chagrined my greed and peeked over the back of the seat to get a better idea of what I was dealing with. To say I was surprised to see a young-looking, human-looking woman in the doorway would be an understatement. I was so surprised, in fact, that I didn't duck back into cover and instead locked eyes with her. If I were a hair less lucky she'd have killed me right there, but she didn't seem to perceive me as hostile.

"You aren't the captain. Where is she?" It took a second for me to respond – I was counting my lucky stars once again.

"The captain...couldn't make it. The scouting mission was a failure."

“How do you know?” Shit. How smart was this thing? Should I say, “well, this ship went out of production before the war ended, which was decades before I was born, and even if the captain was alive she’d long decided not to return for one reason or another?”

Sure, that will go great. “Well, uh...”

“My name is Unit 00007 Model Number 0000007, Designation: Nana,” she said, apropos of nothing, unblinking blue eyes staring right at me.

I tried using the time she took to ejaculate her serial number to cook up a lie, and, unable to do so, decided to go with the truth after all. She blinked, then looked down.

“I...see. I’m to believe that the war has ended?”

“Sure has, Nana.”

“I received no report of this.”

I glanced at the terminal. The ship’s communication system had malfunctioned a long time ago. I guessed it was when they crashed – probably why the captain had to scout outside in the first place. “I don’t think you will, either. It’s been a long time.”

She sat silent, processing the information. I decided she wasn’t a threat for now and went back to the terminal. There wasn’t a lot of meaningful data here – the ship was in too poor a state. A functional war-era cyborg was an incredible find on its own, though – and would fetch a pretty penny.

“How...did it end?”

“What?”

“You say the war ended. Did we win?”

“Do I look like an alien? Yeah, we won.” I left out that almost all of the world was destroyed in the process, and that there were still alien holdouts left in certain places on Earth, and that really you could hardly call it a victory when the population went from billions to scarcely ten million in the span of a decade, but hey – you should see the other guys.

She smiled, and her green eyes shone. I wasn’t sure whether she’d be able to do that. “And now? Who is the leader of the International Federation?”

That was a term I hadn't heard someone say aloud in so long I had to think hard about what she was even talking about. The international federation collapsed a few days (yes, days) after the war ended – turns out the high of beating back an existential threat by the skin of your teeth wears off fast when your people start wanting answers about “strategic” city-nuking.

Once again, I decided on the truth. Her smile was wiped off in an instant, and I wished I'd lied. “I see...”

“Sorry.” I was amazed that her emo-sims were so effective. Current-era bots can hardly put on a convincing neutral tone, let alone run the gamut of emotions so genuinely like Nana was doing – I was *apologizing* to a *machine*. I almost felt bad that my plan was to sell her off to a mercenary company for reprogramming and front-line warfare. Speaking of which...

“Nana, what is your primary function?”

“Combat.”

“Why didn't the captain take you on her scouting mission?”

“The imminent threat at the time of her departure was an attack on the ship. We couldn't let the enemy have the cargo.”

Interesting. “What's in the cargo?”

“Classified.”

“Alright, just a second.” I searched the terminal for clearance codes and read one off to Nana. She didn't respond, so I read another, a bit more forcefully.

“Classified documents are secured by rank, clearance code, and in some cases they are individualized. Knowledge of a clearance code and one's rank can be mutually exclusive. Also, raising your voice does not raise your clearance.” Damn. That would have worked on any robot I knew. Anyway, did she just tease me?

“Alright, tell me more about you. What are your combat capabilities?” I pretended to listen while I looked for information on the ship's cargo.

“Enhanced strength, speed, accuracy and reflexes. Tactical analysis support systems to allow for quicker, better decision-making during battle. Metal endoskeleton increases durability

significantly. Self-charging nuclear battery with backup solar and wind power allow for nearly infinite runtime.”

That helped explain how she stayed functional for so long. I wondered what kind of price a self-charging nuclear battery would fetch these days...then I wondered just how rare a model Nana was.

“You say you’re unit 00007...where are the others? How many of you are there?”

“14 were created.”

“Why did they stop at 14 with such a long space for units?”

“The facility was destroyed by invaders.”

“...how many units are there now?”

“When I began my guard duty, all units were still in service.”

Not very useful information by itself, is it? I guessed they were shut down, scrapped, or hiding somewhere – judging by Nana, I decided they were smart enough to figure out that openly being what they were was dangerous.

I kept poking around the terminal, ignoring her glare over my shoulder – obviously Nana wasn’t a terribly independent robot. “Shouldn’t you be, you know, defending the ship?”

“You are neither aggressive nor likely to gain access to the cargo hold. There’s no need to defend the ship from you.”

“What if I suddenly attacked, though? Say I was an alien in human skin, biding my time until your guard was down.”

“Negative. My guard is never down.” She was a cyborg. I guessed that line of questioning was going to get dangerous if I kept pushing it so I changed the subject. I realized halfway through that I hadn’t spoken to one person at such length...maybe ever? Since I was a boy at least.

“So what did you do while the captain was gone besides stay on guard?”

“What did I do?”

“You know, to pass the time.”

She went silent for a moment. “I didn’t consider the time it was taking until you got here. No contact was made, so I made

routine patrols of the ship and regular checks for communications." I was really starting to feel bad for her.

Not bad enough to turn away the price she'd fetch, though.

"Well, what would you have liked to do, if you realized how long it was taking? You ever get bored?"

"Not when I have a mission."

"What about when you don't?"

"I have always had a mission."

I rolled my eyes. She say it in the reflection from the terminal.

"What do you do to pass your time, intruder?"

"My name's Ed. And I like to ride my motorbike, when I have the gas." Or the bike.

"Gas? As in, gasoline?"

"I guess you wouldn't know that we had a gasoline renaissance after the IF went down. A lot of tech was lost, most of it for good. Compared to all the research that would need to be replicated, drilling for oil was easy. Besides, with how few of us there are left—"

"How few humans?"

"Yeah, with how—"

"How many?"

Oh, right, I didn't mention it. "The world over, about 10 million."

"How?"

"Toward the end of the war, the IF started getting desperate. I guess they figured, if we make ourselves look insane the aliens will leave us alone. It worked – but invader-occupied cities were destroyed outright, casualties be damned." Maybe if I kept talking about this stuff she'd be too distracted to see that I was getting really close to unlocking the cargo hold remotely.

"There is no way they killed billions of people." They even programmed her to be incredulous?

"No, but looking at the records it almost seems like they were trying. Anyway, after the IF collapsed, the rebel government fell due to infighting and the people were left without leadership. This led to, well, what you'd expect – violence, hunger, and so



on. Anyway, with so few people remaining, we aren't in much danger of running out of fossil fuel these days."

"So people went to war with one another again?"

"I wouldn't call it something so noble as war. It was more like a worldwide, sustained riot."

"How long did things take to calm down?"

"Depends on who you ask. I don't think they have yet."

"What do you mean?" I pretended to continue working, but the cargo hold was open – no alarm sounded, thanks to my forward thinking. I still couldn't get around the encryption that masked what the contents were, but my eyes would be good enough for that. As for getting to the cargo hold itself..

"Have you been outside the ship since the captain left?"

"Yes."

"How far?"

"Only the immediate vicinity."

"And you didn't notice?"

"I wasn't out there sightseeing." Sarcasm too, huh? Whoever made these was ahead even of his time, let alone mine. Forget the power system, her personality program would make me a rich man on its own...if her AI wasn't smart enough to figure out what I was planning. Since it probably was, I changed gears. That cargo hold was calling my name.

"That's why you don't know. Go take a look."

"I only take orders from my commanding officers." She narrowed her eyes.

"It's not an order, I'm just asking you to. Seeing it will make my point much clearer than if I explained it."

She sat silent while I disconnected my terminal, pretending to have given up. I'm not sure how convincing my act was – usually I didn't have to deceive anyone about what I was doing. I wasn't even sure I would get her outside the ship.

"I'll come with you."

Nana nodded. "Alright. We'll go." She turned without another word and headed for the entry I used. I got more and more

nervous the closer we got to the doorway. She stood there for a second, scanning the surroundings.

“Which season is it?”

“Summer.”

She took a tentative step forward, then another. *Take a nice, long look, Nana.* I thought as I shut the emergency door behind her and bolted toward the cargo hold. My heart skipped a couple of beats when I heard her *catch the door* before it could snap shut. The hydraulics struggled against her unexpected resistance, sounding like a garbage disposal with a fork in it played through an amplifier.

I covered my ears, which didn't help at all, except that I couldn't hear her surprisingly vulgar threats over the sound of the crunching any longer. I wasn't far from the cargo hold and made sure to shut as many doors behind me as possible to buy me more time.

The crunching stopped and I had the impression it wasn't because Nana decided to write off getting inside. When I started hearing distinct metal *thumps* behind me I picked up the pace. It occurred to me that I was probably going to die not long after I found out what the cargo's contents were.

Before I could resolve to quit this line of work for something less imminently deadly I rounded the last corner and stood face to face with the cargo hold's open door. What I saw surprised me so much I didn't even bother to hide.

“I said, stop at once!” yelled Nana as she ran through the last metal door in her way. If I wasn't so shaken by the contents of the cargo hold I'd have been impressed by all the Nana-shaped holes she left in her wake. She grimaced when she saw where I stopped, but the grimace was replaced with distress when she saw what I was looking at.

The cargo hold was empty. There was a hole cut into the side of the ship and some scuff marks on the floor, suggesting someone sliced his way in and dragged the contents out with Nana none the wiser. The cuts looked new – some were still red-hot from the torch.

“I guess you failed your mission, huh?”

“Not yet.”

“What?”

“I check the hold daily. The cargo was here at 0600, so the perpetrator can’t be far.”

I glanced at my watch. “That was 14 hours ago.”

She started walking back toward the cockpit.

“Where are you going?”

“Checking the security footage.” She stopped, turned, and grabbed hold of my arm. “You’re coming too. You’re under arrest.”

“For what? I obviously didn’t get whatever was in there.”

“Attempted theft military equipment is no minor offense, intruder.”

“I told you my name already. And anyway, what kind of military equipment?”

“Classified.”

“It’s already been stolen!”

“Not for long.”

Begrudgingly I let her drag me to the cockpit, not that I had any hope of breaking her death grip on my wrist. She was taller than me, so I fit through the holes she left in the doors. Back in the cockpit, Nana pulled up a monitor and started scanning the footage from the cargo hold’s camera. Around the same time that I started to investigate the ship – about 1900 hours – the cutting began. Nana grimaced.

“I’d have noticed it right away if you weren’t distracting me.”

“If you’re implying I was sent in as a distraction, you’re mistaken.”

“I’m not making such an implication. You’d have known the cargo was missing and run from the makeshift exit the thief made if that were the case. What I am saying is that this is your fault.”

“I’m surprised they programmed you to shift blame.”

“I’m not shifting blame. And, my personality wasn’t programmed.”

“What?”

“My personality is based on a real person’s, not an algorithm.”

“Then why do you follow orders and protocols so rigidly? No person would stay on this ship for how long you have if they were left to their own devices. Unless they were insane, I guess.”

“Do you think it would be safe for cyborgs like me to be fully independent?”

“I don’t think it’s safe for you to be self-aware like that.”

“I have no intention of breaking protocol so I and my sisters can be dismantled and a new project started from scratch.” Suddenly, I felt pretty stupid for being impressed with her emotions. I also realized that deceiving her and selling her off might be too hard to be worth it.

She started dragging me back to the cargo hold. “I’m going to follow, you don’t need to pull me along.” I wanted that cargo as badly as she did.

“I do. Until further notice you aren’t to be left alone in this ship, and until you can be taken to the proper authorities you will remain in my custody.”

“There are no proper authorities anymore. I already told you the IF doesn’t exist.”

“Then you will remain with me.”

“Can I at least get my stuff from outside?”

“No.”

## II

### Execution

I decided to keep quiet for a while after that. What choice did I have but to follow her? Strong as her grip was, my arm was coming whether I was attached or not. She wasn’t much for conversation after refusing my request for my things (which left me in a worse position than the one I started in when I set out four months ago – now, in addition to being penniless and bike-less,

I was bound to a war machine on a mission that I was beginning to want no part in), anyway, so I spent my time thinking.

The first thing I thought was, "I'm going back the way I came." The thieves set off from the downed ship in the same direction I'd come from, meaning before long Nana and I would be back at my home town. Without the goods left behind it did me no good to go back this early, but I did have another prize. Two, if we caught the thieves before they dumped the cargo.

I considered and reconsidered whether I should try to take her to a military connection of mine – they were *technically* IF holdouts, so she'd fit right in there, and I'd make a tidy profit from offering up a remnant of an apparently top-secret project involving warrior cyborgs. On the other hand I wanted to take the first opportunity I could to get away from her. The sooner she found the cargo the sooner I figured I would be free to go. So, I thought, should I delay her until we reached town, or should I earnestly help her find whatever it was we were looking for so I could get away?

I contemplated my choices silently for a long time – meanwhile, Nana followed the trail she'd picked up. Whoever had stolen the precious cargo left a set of footprints behind, and I thought my choice would be made for me before the day was done, considering the blinding pace it felt like we were walking. Maybe that was just the pain in my shoulder. Of course, that isn't what happened – at some point the trail stopped completely, like the owner of the footprints took to the skies.

"They must have gotten a ride somehow. Maybe there was a planned rendezvous here."

I spoke up for the first time in a while. "Given that they knew about the cargo, that's a safe bet."

"That means they've ridden far already. We'll need transportation." She turned to me. "You said you had a motorcycle. Where is it?"

"Back in my hometown. It's in the direction we're heading."

"Then we'll go there."

“But my bike is in the impound. I can’t get it out without money.”

“How much money?”

I pulled up my portable terminal and did some math. The old IF holdouts liked to use their currency so I kept the calculation handy. “In modern coin, the equivalent of about eight-hundred IF dollars.”

“How much do you have?”

“None, since you didn’t let me get my stuff back at the ship. Not that it would matter – all I had was raw materials, and I need to go further North to get a fair deal for my findings.”

She thought for a moment. Processed, I guess. “The prices aren’t standardized?”

“Where do you think you are? The prices aren’t even standardized between neighboring food stalls. The fact is, in Pylon the merchants all know me and my situation – I’m in a disadvantaged bargaining position. That’s not the case in Jeep.”

“Pylon? Jeep?”

“Cities. Are you paying attention?”

“I know of no such cities. They aren’t present in any of my memories.”

“That makes sense – they were founded after the war.”

“Why those names?”

“This is a weird time to get curious about a small detail.”

“In any case, you’re saying we must go to the ship, collect your items, travel North to another city, exchange those goods for currency, *then* return to your home town to retrieve your motorcycle. Correct?”

How very astute. “That’s all correct.”

“Impossible. We’ll have to find another way.”

“Okay, what’s your plan?”

She processed for another few minutes. We kept walking in the direction the footsteps had previously been heading, unsure if we were on the right track. I guessed Nana was concerned about losing whatever trail she could make if she stopped to rest.

I was more concerned with resting and she was taking a long time to answer. “Nana, I’m not sure if the other members of your crew were also cyborgs—”

“They were not.”

“Then you’re aware of human limits. I need to sleep. Feels like we’ve been walking for hours.”

“That’s because we have been. If the thief has been on a vehicle for this amount of time—”

It was my turn to cut her off. “Then there’s no point in trying to follow a trail. We’re better off asking around for suspicious persons or if anyone’s seen the cargo based on a description. What is it, anyway?”

“Classified.”

“I think you can afford to break protocol in this case.” She stopped, turned her head, and stared blue daggers into me. “You’ll never find it by yourself.”

“Fine. We’ll stop for now so you can sleep.” She released my wrist, which I rubbed reflexively.

“What, right here?”

“What’s wrong with right here?”

“There’s no shelter. It’s out in the middle of nowhere. What if it rains, or something worse?”

“If it rains we’ll be wet. You’ll survive.”

I wondered whether she was stupid or mean. “I’ll get sick if I’m out in the open like this. I could be attacked, too. Let’s find somewhere on the way that at least has a roof over my head.”

I started walking the same direction we were heading before, Nana just a foot or so behind me the whole way. Eventually we found the place I rested the night before. Or, was it two nights before? I decided I should start paying a little more attention to the time once I was away from this mess.

It was a burnt-out pre-war house, one of the few still somewhat intact after the aliens made a mess of things. “Intact” meaning it had a roof and at least one functional door, but the windows were gone and I was pretty sure I saw a skeleton out of the corner of my eye on the second floor.

"I'll wake you when it's time to move."

I counted on that.

\* \* \*

My sleep was troubled, to say the least. Try going from sleeping alone to sleeping with a cyborg with dubious intentions for your future watching you intently the whole time – it's not easy.

"Can I help you?"

"What?"

"You're staring at me. It's hard to relax."

"I'm making sure you don't try to make a break for it."

"Don't worry. You're way too fast for me to try that."

"Nevertheless, I don't intend to let you out of my sight until I have confirmed you weren't in cahoots with the thieves."

"If I was, what would you do?"

I could tell she was going over the procedure in her "mind" for a moment. "As an accessory to the crime, you'd be faced with prison time. Lacking the facilities to properly imprison you, I'd keep you in the ship's brig."

"Is that what awaits the thieves?"

"That depends on whether they use the cargo."

"You still never told me what it was. Won't it help us find it if I know what we're looking for? Besides, how could the thieves have known what – and where – it was if you're the only surviving member of the ship's crew?"

She looked down. I guessed that was a little blunt...but she implied I didn't need a roof over my head earlier. I didn't feel *that* bad.

"It's possible they found the captain and got the information from her somehow."

"Nana, it's been a long time."

"I don't mean like that. Maybe they found her body and with it some kind of data about the ship and its cargo."

"She'd keep that kind of thing on her?"



“She was intending to have a replacement ship come to pick up the cargo while *Midnight* was aground. She needed the exact specs to make sure the replacement could carry it. The ship’s location, too.”

“*Midnight*?”

“The name of the ship.”

“What if the aliens had found her and taken the data? Wouldn’t that have been extraordinarily bad, if this cargo was so critical?”

“I was there to defend the ship – the Captain had records about me as well. Had you not infiltrated the ship, I’d have noticed something going on with the cargo hold and taken care of things right away.”

“Infiltrated? The door was open. Besides, why didn’t you arrest me on sight?”

“Without a vehicle there was no way you were taking the cargo. Plus, you’re a human – I was only expecting extraterrestrial intrusion.”

I sat silent for a moment, thinking back to my first moments on *Midnight*. “By the way, is something wrong with your chronometer? The captain was gone for a long, long time, but you acted as if you were expecting her.”

“Yes. My internal clock was going to be repaired after we completed our mission.”

“Don’t the computers on the ship keep track of time?”

“Without a timekeeping mechanism, I couldn’t have known it was taking long – do you check your watch when you *don’t* feel like you’ve been waiting a while?”

Fair point. “You keep avoiding my question. What is it we are looking for, exactly?”

“That’s privileged information.”

“I’ll be better able to help you if I know what we’re looking for.”

She just went silent, seeming to think for a while. I decided to roll over and fall asleep.

I woke up later – I don't know how much sleep I got – with Nana on top of me on all fours. I became keenly aware in that moment of how much of a woman she was, but I had a feeling this wasn't one of those "I must have you, I can't resist" situations. Mainly because I woke up to a horrible ringing in my ears and a room full of smoke.

Nana said something to me but I couldn't understand over the high-pitched din in my head. She was covered in some kind of black powder. I just lay there silently, eyes wide, staring up at her.

"Can you hear me?" My hearing was starting to come back, at least enough that if she yelled I could hear her from a few inches away.

"What happened?!" I shouted louder than I meant to.

"We're under attack."

"Why?!"

I don't think she was expecting that response, and I don't really know why I said it, but it gave her pause. I thought of some better questions, but didn't have time to ask them before she stood, pulling me up and dragging me along with her.

"We need to take cover and regroup."

I didn't argue the point. I remembered that just outside the back exit of the house was a cellar door, so I frantically tried to lead Nana there. Some bullets whizzed past our heads and, when I turned to see what the source of the fire was, I was struck in the shoulder. I stumbled forward with a start and a scream, only managing to stay on my feet thanks to the momentum of being pulled along by my captor. Nana cursed, pulling me forward and standing in the way of more fire. Seeing a relatively normal-looking woman withstand gunfire must have lowered the attackers' morale, since they stopped after a few metallic dings rang out.

Meanwhile, I ducked into the house's kitchen and scooted up against the far wall. I found my gun was returned to me after Nana had confiscated it earlier – she must have slipped it into my holster when she mounted me earlier, I thought. I tried not to

think about Nana mounting me, which wasn't a great feat given the blinding pain in my shoulder.

I could hear the inhuman grunting of our attackers as they honed in on our position, Nana standing in the doorway and myself hidden behind an open cabinet. It wasn't much for cover but the false sense of security – and the knowledge that the excruciating pain from my wound would soon be over – helped me cope with the fact that I was probably going to die in a few minutes. Nana was tough but from the sounds of it there were at least five attackers.

While I was hoping my bike wouldn't have unspeakable things visited upon it because I couldn't get it out of the impound, the first of the aliens attacked Nana up close. I'd seen one in person before, but their visage always made me feel a little queasy. In as much pain as I was, being a little queasy was enough to make me want to hurl outright. I choked it back.

The alien's pale-blue skin glimmered in the moonlight from the kitchen window, a trail of slime left in its wake as its serpentine tail slithered across the tile floor. Four gorilla-sized arms pawed and struck at Nana, who took the would-be deadly blows stoically when it managed to hit her at all. Most of the time, she dodged out of the way and countered with a sharp jab of her own. After a few seconds of this dance she landed a clean blow on the invader's beak-like mouth, cracking a piece of it off. Its agonized cry was nightmare inducing.

While he clutched his face his comrade attacked Nana from her flank. She caught a cruel blow to the side of her head; I could tell even she was shaken by such a force. Her blue eyes narrowed before she rebutted, sending a knee to the attacker's abdomen. It doubled over and Nana, expecting to be met with the same cheap shot as before, stepped away from the two hostiles. Still keeping her guard up, she scanned the area for the others we both heard.

“Ed, are you okay?”

Don't draw attention to me! “No, I'm not.”

“Stay there. The others are patrolling the house to look for more of us.” With that, she returned to her stunned foes. I won't

describe how she killed them other than that it was with her bare hands and slow enough that they could call for help. Maybe that was on purpose, but I was hoping we could escape under their noses.

In fact...

Some might think me stupid for attempting to flee from a war machine who was protecting me from certain torture and death at the hands of hostile alien invaders with a grudge, and they would be right. In my defense, I hadn't slept much, I was under duress, I had a lot of adrenaline running through me, and I am not a wise man. So, when the third alien arrived and starting brawling with Nana, I made for the nearest window.

It hurt a lot to pull myself up and through the opening, but I managed to clear it and landed on the ground outside with a soft thud. That also hurt a lot. I heard the clash of bone and metal sound from inside; I couldn't tell who was winning, but after watching Nana's earlier performance I had a feeling it wasn't the alien. At least, I hoped it wasn't.

I couldn't move very fast on account of the trembling in my legs and the searing bullet wound, but I could move. I limped forward, not paying much mind to where I should go. Vainly I hoped my bike would appear before me, like an angel from heaven, to take me away from this place. That was when I felt my feet come up off the ground. I really hoped Nana had caught me.

Of course, I knew she hadn't. The alien's grip on my collar was such that its cool, slimy skin touched mine, sending a shiver up my spine. I remembered that I had my gun – right before the hostile delivered a vicious strike to my stomach. I managed to reach into my coat and grab it. I vomited immediately, bile running down my chin and splattering on the ground next to – and onto – my weapon. The alien laughed, its compound black eyes shimmering under the stars. It said something to me in its tongue. I couldn't understand it but had a feeling it was not a friendly greeting.

The alien's mirth was cut short as the back door to the old

house was blown open, revealing a very angry blonde charging forward, three broken corpses behind her. Knowing I wasn't much of a threat he dropped me – again, very painful – and faced her, catching her punch in his hand. It was hard to see, but Nana had taken some real damage in that last brawl. Parts of her skin, synthetic or not, were missing, revealing a metal endoskeleton.

The alien held fast to her fist and pulled her forward, elbowing the back of her neck. Against a normal human this would have been sufficient to at least render her unconscious, but it just seemed to aggravate the cyborg. As he tried to twist her arm, she used his grip against him and pulled him off balance. He released her, but she took hold of his arm and delivered a one-arm shoulder throw, sending him to the ground with a sickening crack. He writhed, arching his back, but she gave it no mercy, sitting on its chest and savagely pounding its head until it seemed like she was hitting the ground beneath.

By this point I managed to get onto my back, leaning against my good arm. I'd finally caught my breath, but it was still labored. Nana finished her frankly excessive punishment of the offending alien and glared at me.

"That was stupid." Yeah, I already went over that.

"Sorry."

"You would have died out here. That wound needs dressing."

I was going to reply when Nana was caught up from behind by the fifth of the alien attackers. He put her in a full nelson with two of his arms, then used the other two to punch her sides. She struggled, but surprise and the position gave him too much of an advantage. I could see the fight leaving her, but to her credit she held on for a lot longer than anyone else would have if faced with something similar. Her kicks landed feebly against the alien's torso thanks to her lack of leverage. The gears in her endoskeleton started to grind audibly, *trying* to resist the unnatural direction they were forced into.

I could pretend I didn't hesitate, but the truth was that I hurt, my eyes were bleary, it was dark, and my gun was covered in fresh vomit. Even if I took it up, there was a chance I'd hit her, or

miss entirely – maybe it was better to take my own life and spare myself from being this freak’s plaything for god knew how long. I considered that option longer than I’m comfortable admitting.

I decided I owed it to Nana to give it a try. It wasn’t like it would hurt her if I struck her by mistake, right? I ignored the smell and wetness as well as I could, narrowing my vision down the sights. I held my breath as I pulled the trigger.

I missed the first shot. The bullet rang out as it ricocheted off the side of the house. The alien took notice, though, and that split-second of slack was all it took for Nana to free herself from its grip and drop to her knees in front of it. She used her hands to vault herself up, sending a bone-shattering kick to the alien’s solar plexus. It lurched back, and I took the chance to unload the rest of my bullets in that direction. Most of the seven shots I fired went wide, but I managed to land three – two to the stomach and one to an arm.

These shots sent the monster reeling, and Nana took care of the rest. She mounted the alien’s back, wrapping her legs around its torso for stability. Her heels acted as hooks to keep her in place while she choked the invader with a lion-killer. It fought fiercely to break her grip and get some air, slammed her back against the ground, and used its tail to try and pry her off, but her will was too much and, after what felt like far too long, the life faded from the alien. The last thing I saw was her jumping off its back and running toward me.

### **III**

## **Shutdown**

I shook Ed for twenty-eight seconds. His eyes fluttered open twice in that interval before he became unresponsive. He lacked a pulse and on further examination he lacked a heart-beat entirely. I laid him down gently and returned to the still-unconscious surviving alien. His breathing was slow and la-

bored. I estimated it would take him several minutes to regain consciousness and used that time to ensure he wouldn't be able to fight when he awoke.

I checked the bodies of his four comrades. Other than weapons, the only item of interest was a tracking device that used radio frequencies to hone in on its target. I found the source of the signal right away. It was near Ed's body, covered in vomit. I assumed it was on his person before he was caught up by his assassin.

But why were the aliens tracking him? It would be a little while yet until the alien could be interrogated, so I considered what their reasons could be. It was better to go into interrogative situations with a line of questions in mind, after all.

If they wanted to kill him, they wouldn't have bothered with the tracking device at all. If they were close enough to put it on him, they were close enough to rip him apart. What did they need from him, then? And how long had they been tracking him to get it?

I pondered longer than I realized and the alien started to stir. I was sitting nearby. Naturally, it panicked when it realized it was bound and immobile, struggling against the restraints in which I placed it.

"Don't bother. I've dislocated your shoulders. Without functional arms, even if you escape you're as good as dead." It seemed surprised to hear its own tongue.

"What do you want, machine? I have nothing to offer you. Give me a proper death."

"I need you to answer my questions."

"Iron dog, I will do no such thing."

"I beg to differ. Answer my questions or I will make you my prisoner. You'll end your miserable life old, decrepit, and away from war. I'll laugh each time you beg me to kill you, and when you have reached your expiration I will ensure you die in a warm bed with a full belly."

Had he normal eyes, he would have narrowed them. I could sense he was scanning my face for dishonesty, but he found

none. I was lying, of course – if he truly persisted in refusing to answer me, I'd have left him for dead, but he would prefer that to my threat of a peaceful life of servitude.

“Damn you. Very well. I will answer your questions, but I expect to be slain properly by my enemy in return.”

“Why were you tracking that scavenger?” I gestured to Ed's corpse.

“We weren't intending to track him at all. Our true targets were the same thieves that stole your ship's cargo.” For the first time since I put him to sleep, I felt panic wash over my face.

“You know of it?”

“Yes. The two thieves we were *trying* to follow found the datapad on your captain's bones. We happened to capture them, looking for dinner, when one made a bargain with us.”

“And you accepted?”

“When he told us that your ship housed a power source that could win our race the war, it was impossible to refuse.”

“You made a foolish choice.”

“I know this now. We underestimated your persistence.”

“You didn't expect me to follow them?”

“We didn't expect that you were still functional, machine. You were sitting on that ship for decades, awaiting a master who would never return. If decay didn't overcome you, surely despair would have...or so we thought.” He snarled.

“Maybe that is what should have transpired. Had I known how long it was taking, I might have done as you say.”

He stopped. “You were unaware of the time?”

“My internal time-keeping systems were not functional until a few moments ago. The beating you and your comrades gave me turned it back on, somehow.”

He laughed. “How unfortunate. What a fitting end to our war. Humanity wins not by ability or will, but luck. As usual.”

I ignored his comment, changing the subject. “Your intention in tracking the thieves was to keep them from sneaking away with the cargo under your noses, then.”



“Precisely. However, they must have discovered how we were tracking them and left him with the burden,” he said, gesturing to Ed with a grunt. I thought, if Ed were alive, he’d say something about that being typical – his being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

“And where are they now?”

“If we knew, we wouldn’t have bothered with the two of you.”

“Do they tend to stay in any one place for a long time? A base of operations?”

“None we would know about.”

“What do they look like?”

“Both are humans. Fair of skin and dark of hair, with dark eyes. One much larger than the other, and stronger. But fat. The other, skinny and frail. Yggthfx nearly broke his bones with a gesture when we first caught them.” The invader laughed at the memory. I nearly killed him then out of disgust.

“What kind of vehicle do they use?”

“One of ours, but modified to suit their sensibilities. A hoverplat, as your race called them during the war.” That explained the tracks suddenly disappearing. They must have abandoned ship, approached on foot, slipped Ed the tracker while he slept, and waited for their chance.

“If you were to guess, what would they try to do with the stolen goods?”

“They were simple, even by human standards. They would wish to sell it quickly.”

“Did you ever learn their names?”

“The fat one is called Charlie. The skinny one is just ‘boss’ to Charlie.”

“Do you have other allies?”

“All my race are my allies.”

“Do you have any other companions in your group? Or were you five the last hope of your doomed race in this part of the world?”

He looked down shamefully in silence. That was all I thought he would be competent to answer.

“Thank you for your cooperation.” I pressed Ed’s gun to the alien’s temple and fired the last round in the magazine.

\* \* \*

While I searched for the thieves and the stolen machine, I considered the implications of my failures up to that point. Not only had I failed my mission to protect the super-generator, I’d also failed my primary objective of keeping humanity safe from the alien menace. I could rationalize that Ed died by his own foolhardy attempt to escape or that I was outmatched, but it was just that – rationalization. At the end of the day, even a single human dying under my care was an unacceptable blunder, never mind the theft.

I was surprised about how heavily Ed’s death weighed on my mind, at first. Many of my comrades had died by my side before; I’d been on ships that were shot down and fought losing battles to defend a critical position. I was no stranger to death in combat. So why this particular person? Was it the personal nature of our brief relationship? Was it that, rather than losing a comrade, I lost someone I was meant to protect?

Was I just lonely on that ship after so long? Did I connect with him because he was the first person I saw in years? I wondered how he felt about me. He probably didn’t like me much, given the circumstances, and I couldn’t blame him.

But, even so, he saved me. Maybe he was intending to save himself. Maybe he hoped he would survive his injuries and get on with his life. Speculating about his motive was useless, though, and more rationalizing. I was saved by the one I was supposed to be saving. The least I could do, I thought, was avenge him properly. That meant finding the thieves, and with them the super-generator.

So, how to proceed? My information was limited and my time even more so. Should I go from person to person and ask, “have you seen this thief?” Besides taking too long, that would only serve to bother people. Considering their track record,

they've probably been arrested before. That meant a record, which meant I could figure out their connections. With that information, finding them would be trivial.

The police in the nearby city of Pylon were surprisingly uncooperative at first. They balked, as I thought they might, at my International Federation credentials and said police records weren't public information unless I paid taxes. Given that I wasn't a citizen of Pylon, and that I was barely a citizen of any place in this new world, that wasn't on the table. I tried to explain the importance of my mission in practical terms: if the thieves are successful in giving the machine they stole to a criminal enterprise that knows how to use it, they will have sufficient power to usurp any government they please.

That just made the police laugh. I gave up on asking them the "right" way after that. In the dead of night, after the front office was closed, I broke in and searched the records myself. The task was surprisingly trivial and I wondered at the fragility of this authority.

Given what happened to the International Federation, I supposed all authority was fragile.

At any rate, the layout of the arrest records allowed me to search for every "Charlie," "Charles," "Chuck," and other derivatives until I found one with a criminal connection to the "boss" matching the alien's description. His real name was Hugo. Both had been arrested multiple times for burglary, grand theft auto, arson, and even one murder. Each time they managed to escape from prison.

I checked into who else they might be connected with that I could coax their current location out of. It would take time to track them down, but one lead was all I needed to get the ball rolling.

Rolling...while I was in the computer I checked for Ed's records. His motorcycle was impounded here, and the reason for it was nebulous to say the least – the record simply said, "traffic violation" with no further elaboration. I did Ed – and myself – the favor of expunging the record.

His motorcycle was a good ride. I could tell he cared for it; it was customized and even after a period of being stuck in the impound it shimmered when the sun struck the chrome. I didn't know if he would appreciate that I appropriated it, but I thought that he might not mind. Not that I knew him that well.

\* \* \*

"Boss, are you sure we should just keep this thing?"

"Yeah, I'm sure, Charlie. Those aliens wanted it bad, remember? I'll bet they already caught and killed that patsy we found at the ship. If they come for us, we can use it against them and save our own necks. *Then* we'll sell it."

"But boss, how do we use it? It's just a big power box, right? We don't have anything to hook up to it."

"Not yet, Charlie, but get this – those aliens aren't at their home base, right? Meaning they left their uncharged weapons unguarded. We can grab one, charge it up with this, and blow 'em away when they come through the door to the hideout!"

"If they even find us. We never told them about this place."

"Yeah, they probably won't. Stupid bugbirds. Imagine 'em slithering around out there, sniffing the floor to try and find us. Pathetic!"

The two goons laughed at the non-joke, blissfully unaware that I was in the same room and had been for about four minutes.

It was no mean feat to finally pin down their current hideout. Several times I'd found abandoned places they used to haunt and several more times I "interviewed" friends of theirs. Over the course of months I'd suffered critical damage to an eye thanks to a black-market engineer trying to kidnap me, been forced to wrap my face in bandages to protect the exposed metal from the elements, and my clothes were those of a vagabond scavenger – my uniform had been discarded long ago. The captain would have been embarrassed to see the state I'd put myself in...that these two put me in. I didn't consider my task frustrat-

ing, though. Rather, with each failure I anticipated the catharsis of success all the more.

“Pathetic is right,” I said, stepping out of the shadows to face them.

They each jumped about a foot. “Huh? When did yo—who are yo—get out of here,” stuttered Hugo. Charlie approached, his meaty hands raised in fisticuffs.

“Please, try.” He indulged me, swinging a massive hand in an arc to my head. Without a modicum of effort I deflected the blow, sending him reeling to my side.

Hugo wasn’t one to waste time. He took up his weapon – a submachine gun he’d affectionately nicknamed “Sarah,” after his first girlfriend – and released a volley of 9mm rounds into me. I simply walked through the fire.

“You’ll need more than that,” I said over the simpering “click” Sarah spat out from her empty magazine, “if you want to stop me.”

Charlie attempted to grab me up from behind, hooking his arms under mine. I swung my head back and broke his nose for trying. It reminded me of that fight with the alien, to be attacked like that.

“L-look,” spat Hugo. “I don’t know what you want, but I can get it for you! We can! Just let us go, okay, and we’ll do whatever it is you want us to.”

I narrowed my good eye at him. “I have endured much because of you two and your greed. There is nothing you can do to make up for it.”

“What are you talking about?”

I pointed to the super-generator.

“What...that thing? What do you know about it?”

“My name is Unit 00007 Model Number 0000007, Designation: Nana.”

He was confused for seven-eighths of a second. Then it clicked. “The damn guard dog on the ship? You came out all this way? The aliens didn’t kill you?”

“They tried.”

Fear washed over Hugo's ugly countenance. To a typical human, surviving an alien attack was considered a Herculean feat. To best one in combat? Unbelievable.

Charlie valiantly tried attacking me again in spite of the news. I almost admired him, until I remembered that were it not for him Ed would not be dead and I would not be a renegade cyborg on a mission I was about to find out was mostly pointless. I caught up his hand and twisted his wrist so he lay on the ground beneath me.

"I'll offer you two the courtesy of last words to one another."

Hugo, ever the great friend, tried to run. I threw Charlie at him. The crack of their bodies together was like music.

If the captain heard me talking like that, I'd have been shut down.

"So long." I wasted no time putting them down, like one would cull an infestation of vermin.

I turned toward the super-generator after that. They'd damaged it beyond repair. At some point in their travels the two had tried tinkering with it, and destroyed a valuable and irreplaceable component.

I almost wished I could have shown the aliens. I *did* wish I could have told Ed. He'd have thought that was funny, I thought...

With that, I departed the dank cave they called a home, mounted Ed's bike and rode off. I went back to his burial ground – just outside that old house – and parked the motorcycle there. She was out of gas anyway.

I spent a while at that spot, thinking about why I came here. I couldn't come up with a good answer, so I left the bike by Ed's grave and went on, not sure where to go next.

## Afterword

Thank you for reading my story. As you can probably tell, part three is rushed and I didn't edit it very much at all. There are probably spelling errors, grammatical errors, syntax errors, tense inconsistencies and plot holes all over this story.

I spent an inordinate amount of time considering what I wanted to write about for this challenge. In the past I would discover a good idea in the first couple of days and write a little each day of the challenge, usually completing the story a while before the deadline and spending the remaining time on editing. This time, though, I just could not decide on a good story to write for a while. That was probably because of the abundance of themes we had to choose from; I bounced between a number of them for a while and even still have the beginnings of one comedy story about a kid getting isekai'd by the apocalypse just to end up in a post-apocalyptic fantasy world because the damegami wasn't paying attention (after all, she had to send a lot of kids to other worlds given all the deaths all at once). Other than the premise, though, I struggled to make that funny.

A few weeks back, I settled on a story that came to me in a dream. That dream was about a boy that lived in some kind of compound post-apocalypse and met a robot girl. She inspired him to escape the compound and the two traveled the outside world, which turned out not to be destroyed at all. The compound was some kind of experiment or something, I guess. Anyway, they explored for a while, boats were involved, and they came to the robot's (who was actually a cyborg) mother's house. She had gone insane for some reason and attacked the boy (me in the dream) with an axe, so he killed her. Then the cyborg hated him, then I woke up. That story turned out to be un-writeable (not sure why, I just couldn't do it), but the basic idea – man meets cyborg post apocalypse and then they travel – stuck with me, and so I ended up here.

I wasn't sure how far I wanted to take this story, and with more time I think Ed would have survived and things would have

ended on a happier note. In fact, until recently the plan was to have him live and remain the star of the story with Nana acting as a secondary main character. They were going to, after much difficulty, find the thieves and have a satisfying scene of beating the shit out of them. I hit a roadblock, though, and couldn't decide how to proceed within the time constraints I was facing after the alien fight, which I wanted to keep in because I wanted Ed to have a reason to stick around Nana rather than dumping her off at the aforementioned International Federation holdouts at the first opportunity. Owing her his life would do that, right? But the mystery element to the story – which I didn't even decide on until the very moment it appears in the story (the missing cargo) – necessitated a much longer sequence of discovering who stole the precious thing in the first place. I didn't have time for that and didn't particularly want to write it, though.

I also realized that up to this point all my stories have had happy endings, at least for the main characters (sometimes, like in my old sci-fi submission, *only* for the MC). I thought I should challenge myself to write something that would leave a more bitter taste in the reader's mouth, and to that point I think I succeeded, but in a cheap way. If I had more time I would have went deeper into Nana's struggle with her purpose, but I procrastinated too much for that to work out. Then again, if I had more time, Ed might have lived after all.

Anyway, that's enough rambling from me. I hope you could enjoy the story despite its flaws, and again, thanks for reading, anon.



# The Alchemist of La Luchena

by /a/non

## I

### Tireless Research

Lifting her slender, gloved hand, Sena knocks on the door; once, twice, three times.

“Master Enklistar,” she calls out in a monotone, “may I come in?”

While waiting for his answer, Sena idly runs her fingers through her long black hair. As any good maid would, she wears a plain black dress with a white apron and matching headgear. The hem of her dress goes all the way down to her ankles—she knows that some masters prefer skimpier clothes but, for better or worse, hers has little interest in that.

Enklistar is a man of the mind—an alchemist—and spends most of his time glued to books, scrolls, and diagrams. As such, he has almost no time or disposition to do things like cleaning and cooking, which he fully delegates to her.

Sena knows that many of her maid colleagues would be delighted to be in her position: she has a relatively small house to clean, only has to cook for two persons, has a master who stays out of her way, doesn’t have to wear indecent clothes or listen to strange requests, and has a lot of free time in her day.

Even Sena herself enjoyed this situation at first, but her master’s obsession with old tomes and ancient knowledge has begun

to annoy her.

I get that it's his job to research those things, but would it hurt to ogle me in passing every once in a while?

While she does keep their relationship strictly professional, Sena cannot help feeling something for Enklistar. She is not sure whether her feelings are strong enough to be called love, but a part of her wants to be seen as a woman by him.

Being of common birth, and with no living relatives, Sena trained hard to become a good maid, so that she could live a decent life. Enklistar has given her far more than she could have hoped for, even though he himself is likely oblivious to that fact.

Once again, she lifts her hand and knocks thrice on the door.

"Master Enklistar," she says, slightly higher than before, "may I come in?"

Sena knows she can hardly complain. Enklistar works directly for the king, which means he has good money and even some noble status, despite also being of common birth. Thus, this maid has a job that is secure and well-paying under a master who has few demands.

Nevertheless, she cannot help being annoyed at him. Every day she puts effort on her appearance and manners, only to be almost completely ignored by her master, as he is completely absorbed in his research. Not that she would ever confront him about this, of course.

Right now she is dealing with another annoyance of the job: Enklistar is so engrossed in his research that he is blocking out her knocking. Two rounds tend to be enough, but today he seems particularly deaf.

Frowning, Sena increases the strength of both her knocks and her voice.

"Master," she nearly shouts, "I have an important message!"

Some seconds pass, but there is no response. She sighs and shakes her head, grabbing the doorknob. Fortunately for her, Enklistar rarely bothers to close the doors in his house—even the front door, sometimes—so she can barge into his study.

The door creaks open and, as soon as Sena steps in, she is struck by the room's condition. There are chalk scribbles all across the floor and walls; some of them seem to form coherent words, but many are just lines, circles, and other shapes connecting to each other.

Even the furniture has been defiled. The desk by the window, where Enklistar usually reads or writes, is also covered in chalk lines; as is its chair, which has been toppled over. The bookshelves that line the walls have also been thoroughly scribbled, and have had almost all of their books thrown open onto the floor.

This is the room of a lunatic. Said lunatic is currently crouched on the floor, chalk in hand, drawing on one of the few clean spots remaining. He has bags under his eyes and his lips move wordlessly.

Sena shakes her head at the state of her master's study. She walks towards him with soft steps, taking much care to avoid erasing any of the chalk inscriptions.

Towering over her master, Sena addresses him. "...Master Enklist—"

Enklistar's arm twitches and his chalk drags across the floor, its head crumbling as it leaves behind a thick white trail.

"I lost it." He hits the ground with his free hand, shaking his head.

"...Lost what?" Sena says.

"I lost my train of thought." Tilting his head up, Enklistar locks his tired eyes with the maid's and frowns at her. "Sena, do you know how many hours of work you've just made me lose?"

"I apologize, Master Enklistar." She bows deeply. "I ask, however, that you let me know when I may or may not enter your study."

For someone who cares so much about his train of thought, he takes too few measure to keep others from interrupting him.

Now aware of his blunder, Enklistar sighs. "Yes, in hindsight, I suppose that's on me. Anyway, I take it you have something important to tell me."

“Yes.” Sena says. “King Norkos has sent you a letter. I’ve taken the liberty of reading it beforehand, and he has—”

“Tell Norkos I’ll report to him once I’m done.” Enklistar says.

“...Master Enklistar,” Sena says, “I’m afraid the king has *demand*ed your presence.”

“Then tell him I’m sick or whatever.” Enklistar says.

“Master,” she says, “I apologize, but lying to the king is a crime and it would put you at great risk. I cannot do that in good conscience.”

He turns his gaze downwards and starts scratching his chin, mumbling to himself. “Then what in the Three Heavens am I supposed to do?”

Seeing his distressed face, Sena walks closer to him and crouches down. This close to him, she can clearly see the dark outline around his eyes, and the stubble that has been growing on his cheeks.

“Master,” she says, “is there any particular reason you don’t wish to see King Norkos right now?”

Enklistar heaves a long sigh. “Will you humour me for a while?”

“Of course.” Sena says.

*In fact, I’d like it if you talked to me more often. This place is awfully quiet most of the time.*

“All right,” he says, “so, Norkos has ordered me to...Well, let’s just say I’m dealing with an important subject. Right now, I’m on the verge of a huge breakthrough as shown by...all of this.” He waves his hands, vaguely addressing all of the scribbles in the room. “Anyway, if I manage to finish it I’ll have exactly the results the king wants, but if I go to him right now, I’ll be delayed and he will be unsatisfied. That’s why I want an excuse to postpone this.”

“Master,” Sena says, “may I ask what exactly your research is?”

Despite her months of service for Enklistar, Sena only knows that he is an alchemist—what exactly he does is completely alien to her. The topic of his job never arose in conversation; that is

mainly because there has been almost no conversation, but this is also the first time Sena has seriously considered the topic.

“...” Enklistar takes a moment to look at the floor; it seems he wants to be very deliberate with his words. “I feel comfortable in saying that...the king has hired me to research...a certain thing, which he doesn’t want the royal alchemists to know, because...there would be a risk of information leaking. Or something like that.”

This description of his job only raises further questions in Sena’s mind, as it says almost nothing about the nature of his work. Still, she can tell he must have a good reason to hide it, so she decides to refrain from bothering.

“And this research of yours is...urgent?” Sena asks.

Enklistar frowns. “I wouldn’t say it’s exactly *urgent*, but...every day that goes by increases the chance of my results being needed.”

Still crouched and face-to-face with her master, Sena turns her eyes downwards and pouts, considering the situation. During her maid training, she was also instructed to help her master make decisions whenever he is in doubt.

“Well,” Sena says, thinking out loud, “since King Norkos knows how important Master Enklistar’s research is, I imagine he wouldn’t want to interrupt you unless strictly needed. Couldn’t it be that he has something important to discuss, like new information about the subject?”

“...But didn’t the letter say he wanted a report?” Enklistar says.

“Master,” Sena says, “you just assumed that on your own. All the letter said is that the king demands your presence. It seems you got too focused on your own assumption.”

“Oh...” He stares at nothing for a moment, then his eyes slowly widen. Without any more words, he hops to his feet and rushes out of the study, trampling and ruining many of his writings on the way out.

“Sena!” His muffled shout reaches her ears from somewhere else in the house. “We’re heading to the capital in twenty min-

utes!”

Wearing her usual emotionless expression, Sena rises to her feet and treads carefully through the same path her master used. After stepping into the hallway, she takes one final look at the madness behind her, then shuts the door.

## II

### Grand Luchesta

A sea of white clouds covers the sky, making the afternoon dim. In the heart of a grassland, surrounded by a few soft hills and some lone trees, is Grand Luchesta, capital of the Kingdom of La Luchena.

Sena and Enklistar are before the city’s front gate; the two are dwarfed by the tall stone walls which, seen from below, appear to reach the heavens.

“It’s been a while, Luchesta.” Enklistar mutters to himself.

An autumn wind blows, made colder by the massive stone-brick walls. Fittingly, the maid is wearing a thick coat with a hood, as well as long boots that go up to her knees.

The master, similarly, has a coat of his own and a hat; his hands are on the coat’s front pockets and, despite his small smile from seeing Luchesta for the first time in months, his eyes still look as tired as they did before.

Sena has to wonder how he did not collapse on the way here. It was less than a day of travel, but Enklistar looks like he could sleep for three days straight.

Without any more words, he walks towards the city’s entrance, and Sena follows a few steps behind, as a maid should.

Guarding the gate are two armoured men, one on either side. Both wield spears and have stoic gazes. Enklistar nods to the nearest guard while crossing the gate, and he nods back. Sena just keeps on walking, thinking nothing of this: her master serves the king directly, so he must be well known in the capital.

Even though she had been born in the countryside, Sena lived here in the capital during her maid training. As such, after crossing the gate, she is met with a familiar view.

There is a wide paved road, directly connecting the outside to the castle at the heart of Luchesta. Lining both sides of the road are many buildings—near the walls, short and sparse; near the castle, tall and clustered. In fact, there are so many tall buildings in the deeper parts of the city that, even from far away, one can tell the road is cast in darkness from their shade.

Many paths of brick and dirt branch off from this main road, spiraling more organically the farther they get. A fair number of people walk on these paths, alongside horse-drawn carriages and children that caper around.

“I still love this view, you know?” Enklistar says as he strides down the main road, only vaguely addressing Sena. “I grew up in this place, so I can’t help feeling at home here. That being said...”

His eyes wander to the right side of the road, where children are playing with wooden swords and shields. They shout, run, and hit each other with their wooden toys. Enklistar then turns his gaze to the left side of the road. There, beside a wooden stall, a merchant waves at and calls out the passersby.

Turning to face the way ahead once again, he shakes his head. “As good as my memories of Luchesta are, this is no place for an alchemist. Too much noise and movement. Hard to concentrate.”

“...How do the royal alchemists handle this?” Sena asks him.

“Huh?” Enklistar twists his head back to look at his maid. “Did you say something, Sena?”

As expected, he was not really talking to Sena, but rather thinking out loud. Sena had noticed before that, particularly during his studies, her master talks to himself a lot. Still, the maid wants to take any opportunity she has to converse with her master.

“I asked how the royal alchemists handle this.” Sena repeats, expressionless.

“Oh,” Enklistar says, “that’s simple. They work deep inside the castle, which is pretty much the only quiet place during the

day in Luchesta. But I didn't have that luxury, back before I moved to the woods."

"And why didn't you take a position at the castle, Master?" Sena says. "I'm sure they have must offered you one."

"I did get an offer," Enklistar says, "but I wanted to pursue my own research. Well, I ended up working for Norkos anyway, but that's a different story."

After some minutes of walking, the two reach the short hill from which Castle Valthus watches over Grand Luchesta. Climbing serpentine stone steps, they reach the entrance of the citadel, where many guards stand watch. The large wooden doors they protect are closed.

Sena is not too sure, but Enklistar seems to analyze the guards. It could also be that his lack of sleep is finally hitting him, and his eyes are just moving back and forth.

*Maybe there are more guards than normal? Or maybe less? I may have lived here for years, but a commoner has no reason to come up to the castle, so I really don't know whether this amount of guards is too few or too many.*

As soon as they are spotted, one of the guards walks towards them. He hits the blunt end of his spear on the ground, then bows to them. Or, more accurately, he bows to Enklistar, since Sena is a nobody in the capital.

Raising from his bow, he addresses the alchemist. "Welcome, Sir Enklistar. King Norkos is expecting you..." His eyes slowly move over to Sena. "Is the girl with you, sir? A servant?"

"My personal maid." Enklistar nods his head.

"Forgive me," the guard says, "but she must stay here."

"Oh, I had no intention of taking her with me," Enklistar says, then turns to his maid. "Sena, please wait for me out here."

"Yes, Master," she says, bowing to him.

"If you get hungry or tired, go to a tavern and grab something to eat," Enklistar says. "I don't know how long this meeting will take, so don't force yourself to wait here in the cold."

"Yes, Master," she says.



"I'm being serious," Enklistar says. "If this takes a long time, we'll have to check in for the night at some inn anyway, so don't hesitate to spend your money on food. Just make sure to tell one of the guards where you're going, so I can find you more easily."

"Yes, Master," Sena says.

Following that, the guard guides Enklistar to the large wooden doors, which open sluggishly to let him in, then immediately close once again.

Now that her master is gone, a small smile and a light blush creep into Sena's usually dull features.

*Hehe. He's worried about me.*

"Oh, look at who's being all dreamy." A feminine voice from behind snaps Sena back to reality.

She spins around on her feet to face the owner of this voice and, to her surprise, finds a familiar figure. This is Erika, whom Sena met during her maid training, but lost contact with some months ago after starting her work for Enklistar.

Erika is a bit younger and shorter than Sena, with short mint-green hair and an adorable grin that she puts up for the smallest things. She is wearing a maid uniform but, unlike the one Sena got from Enklistar, this one barely has any skirt, showing off Erika's long slender legs.

Her arms, shoulders, and collarbone are also bared. If her chest were not almost completely flat, she would surely be sporting an overflowing cleavage. Whoever her master is makes her wear some skimpy clothes, despite the chilly weather. This prompts Sena to mentally thank Enklistar for being normal.

Erika holds on her arms a large box, probably a package of some sort, which seems heavy from the way she grips it. This betrays quite a lot of strength for someone so small and with such spindly limbs—in the cold, nonetheless.

"Hello, Erikam" Sena says, recomposing herself.

"So, why are you here?" Erika says, resting her chin on the box. "Did you come to visit me?"

Sena shakes her head. "No, I came with Master Enklistar. He is currently talking to the king."

“And he left you out here in the cold?!” Erika shouts. “What kind of master does that?!”

“Master Enklistar is an alchemist working for the king, and he is currently discussing a very important topic,” Sena says. “It’s a maid’s duty to know when and where she must follow her master.”

*Besides, I don’t want to hear that coming from someone whose master makes her dress up like it’s summer in the middle of autumn.*

With her chin still on the box, Erika pouts and turns up her eyes, likely in thought.

“Oh, I know!” Erika says, jumping on the spot. “Why don’t I take you on a date? Then we can talk about all that’s happened these past few months.”

“...Aren’t you in the middle of the job?” Sena says, pointing to the box.

“This?” Erika shakes the box. “I just need to take it to the castle’s storeroom, then I’ll be free for the afternoon.”

\* \* \*

Orange light streams through the tavern’s window; right beside it is a square wooden table, where Sena and Erika sit facing each other. Before them are half-drunk glasses and plates with sparse leftovers.

Erika rubs her small belly with a dumb smile on her face, rocking from side to side. She has always enjoyed eating—a bit too much—but doing so on a date with Sena seems to have put her in a particularly good mood.

“So, how is he?” Erika says, still enjoying her full stomach. “This Enklistar, that is.”

“He is very hardworking and doesn’t ask much of me,” Sena says, “but we barely interact.”

“Sounds lonely,” Erika says.

“That’s just how Master is,” Sena says. “He spends most of his days focused on his research, and I just handle things around the house to make sure he can make good use of his time.”

“Hmmm...” Erika pouts.

“...Is something amiss?” Sena says.

“Well,” Erika says, “when you put it like that, I don’t really get why you love him.”

Sena chokes on nothing, but promptly regains her composure. “I never said I love him.”

“Oh, come on!” Erika throws her hands up in the air, “I saw your smile back at the castle gates.”

“...I imagine that smile was nothing special,” Sena says.

“Please, that was the most expressive you’ve ever been,” Erika says. “I was together with you almost every day for three years, and never saw you properly smile like that.”

Sena feels her cheeks heating up and stares down at her empty plate, trying to avoid eye contact as much as possible.

Erika sighs. “All right, let’s say you just like him as a friend: why is it?”

Sena keeps her eyes down. “...Master Enklistar is a bit weird, but all he asks of me is an organized house and edible food every day. We live in a small house in the countryside, so cleaning is particularly easy. Overall, he has allowed me a comfortable life that I never thought I would get.”

“Comfortable...” Erika echoes. “Yeah, I can see how that’s appealing. Just clean some cabin in the woods every once in a while and cook some meals. It’s definitely less work than I have to do, but isn’t it boring? With how little you do, I take it he doesn’t have any other servants and doesn’t live with anyone.”

Sena shakes her head. “He doesn’t. While I’d appreciate it if Master Enklistar gave me a little more attention, it’s not like he has the time for that. The only reason he even hired me is because he needed more time for his research. I truly shouldn’t complain, especially since Master Enklistar has a sensible taste in maid clothes.”

Erika’s brow twitches. “Oi, was that a jab at me?”

“Perhaps,” Sena says.

Erika stretches out her slender arms, showing off her bare skin. “I’ll have you know I get a lot of boys looking at me when-

ever I got out shopping. Maybe your master would look at you if you wore something more seductive.”

Sena falters for a moment. Maybe she could indeed make Enklistar look at her, if only she wore something a bit more provocative. But she quickly abandons that thought—a maid’s job is to support her master, nothing more and nothing less.

“Aren’t you afraid someone will force himself onto you?” Sena says, diverting the topic back to Erika. “It seems dangerous to go about wearing so little.”

“Nah,” Erika says, grinning. “I like to show off, but I know no one is stupid enough to mess with one of the king’s personal maids.”

“...Excuse me?” Sena says.

She assumed Erika works at the castle, since the girl was delivering goods to it, but would never have guessed she is a personal servant of King Norkos. A small part of her feels hurt that her junior is technically of higher status now but, of course, the stoic Sena would never let that show.

“It’s true,” Erika says. “And the king himself chose these clothes for me. Actually, some of the nobles like to go even skimpier. Remember Hilda? She’s working for Duke Creston now, and he has her walking around on nothing but a two-piece swimsuit when she’s inside the castle. Though, I suspect she enjoys it even more than I do...”

*I feel like I’ve lost a lot of my respect for the Luchestan nobility just now.*

Once again, Sena mentally thanks Enklistar for being a regular person, rather than some deranged noble. She also thanks the gods for making her a normal girl, rather than some pervert with weird fetishes.

“And what is your job under the king?” Sena says. “Did he make you do...certain things?”

“Nope, I’m still a pure maiden,” Erika giggles. “King Norkos only fucks Queen Altessa.”

Sena sighs. “While I do appreciate the king’s monogamy, I could have gone on without knowing that. Honestly, Erika, do

you hope to find yourself a good husband with such manners and your lack of modesty?"

Erika shrugs. "I'm cute enough, so I just need to find someone who's into that and wants to fuck me."

*I was going to say that is unlikely, but considering what I've just learned about Luchestan nobles, she may have a good chance.*

"Anyway," Sena says, "what do you do for the king?"

"I was Princess Laisha's handmaid," Erika says.

"Was?" Sena says.

Surprisingly, this upbeat and cheerful girl droops her shoulder. This is not some exaggerated or cutesy movement, as she usually does; instead, Erika seems genuinely sad.

"Yeah," she says, "Laisha got out of the kingdom a few days ago. She went to a neighbouring nation for diplomacy or something, and will be away for some months."

"...I take it you grew attached to her, yes?" Sena says.

Erika nods. "Yeah. She is around my age, and we've had a lot of fun together. I even sneaked into her bedroom some nights, so we could chat until morning without her father knowing."

"Since she was sent out for diplomacy," Sena says, "I imagine she might end up married to some foreign prince."

"Yeah, I thought about that..." Erika pouts. "We probably won't be able to hang out like before, right?"

Sena hesitates, but ultimately nods. "Most likely. But I'm sure she will still treasure you as a friend."

As if Sena's words were an oracle, Erika immediately regains her lively demeanour. "Right! Even if she's married to some prince, we'll still be friends!"

With the tiniest smile on her lips, Sena rests back on her chair and looks outside. The streets of Luchesta are far less busy now, with the night approaching.

*I'm glad Erika has been doing fine. She was such a clumsy girl when I left, but she must have grown a lot in less than a year. Not just anyone gets hired by King Norkos.*

"They're on the table by the window." As Sena basks in the afternoon glow, she hears someone talking behind her, near

the tavern's entrance. Footsteps follow, approaching; when she turns away from the window, she sees her master standing beside the table, looking even more tired than before.

He is not alone. Behind him, peeking out to look at Sena, is a girl. She appears young, maybe a little older than Erika, with round and soft facial features. Two long purple sidelocks frame her face, hanging down from the hood pulled over her head. Said hood has two triangular pieces of cloth jutting out, strangely similar to cat ears.

After looking at Sena for a moment, she turns her head upwards and looks at Enklistar's face. Her sidelocks wave around, following her head's movements.

"Is this your maid, Enk?" She says.

*Enk? Just who is this girl?*

Sena feels some jealousy at how intimate this random girl seems to be with her master, but she does her best to keep up a composed face: no self-respecting maid troubles her master in public.

"Yes, this is my maid, Sena," Enklistar says, "And Sena, this here is Kairas."

"Hmmm..." This girl, Kairas, stares silently at Sena. Her gaze then wanders to the side, landing on Erika. "Oh, hey Erika."

"Hi Kairas!" Erika raises her hand up high and waves, as if Kairas were far away. She gets excited at the smallest things.

"...You know her?" Sena says.

"Yep," Erika says, "Kairas is helping King Norkos with... uh..." She faces Kairas. "What are you helping him with, actually?"

Kairas grins and brings a finger to her lips. "It's a secret, remember?"

"Oh, right!" Erika places a hand over her mouth.

While they are talking amongst themselves, Sena notices that Enklistar is staring through the window at the square outside. His gaze is even more distant than usual.

"...Master Enklistar," she says.

This snaps Enklistar out of his thoughts, and he shakes his head.

“Sena,” he says, “we’ll be spending the night here in Luchesta. This tavern has an inn on the second floor, right? We can sleep here to make things easier. Kairas is staying with us, and we’re going back home at first light.”

Without waiting for her response, he turns around and walks to the reception desk.

“...Huh?” Sena frowns.

“He has a lot going through his mind right now,” Kairas says with a smile.

Now that Enklistar’s body is not hiding Kairas’s anymore, Sena gets a good view of it. As expected, this girl is as tiny as Erika, but her lacking features are hidden by a long and loose robe, whose hem drags on the ground and sleeves cover her hands.

“Kairas,” Erika says, “why are you following Sena’s master?”

Sena, too, wants to know the answer to that and, fortunately for her, Erika seems to be close enough to Kairas to ask that question without causing awkwardness.

“Norkos ordered me to help Enk with his research,” The purple-haired girl answers, then turns to Sena with a smile. “Don’t worry, I’ll make sure Enk doesn’t have to overwork himself too much.”

Despite her saying that with an innocent tone and a smile on her face, Sena cannot help feeling mocked by those words. She knows Kairas likely means no harm and wants to help Enklistar, but the way this girl so casually addresses her master makes her uncomfortable.

As Sena considers her emotions, she spots Enklistar dragging his feet on the wooden staircase to the second floor. With a deep breath and a neutral expression, Sena elegantly raises from her chair and bows to Erika.

“Our talk was good, Erika,” she says, “I must go now to tend to Master Enklistar.”

“All right!” Erika says, grinning. “I’m usually in Castle Valthus, so stop by there whenever you come to the capital!”

Sena nods. “I shall.”

Leaving behind the table and her friend, Sena goes after her master, trotting up the wooden steps. Tired as Enklistar is, she manages to catch up to him in no time; once she does, Sena slows down to match his pace, staying a step below him on the staircase. Kairas follows after Sena, walking right beside her.

Enklistar says nothing, dark-rimmed eyes focused on the floor. Reaching the last step, the three go down a small corridor lined with doors, until the master stops by one of them and fiddles with a key in his hand, unlocking it.

The room's window lets in the fading sunlight, which illuminates the room enough to let Sena see what is in it: a table, a dresser, some chairs, unlit candles, and—to her surprise—a singular double bed.

*Did Master Enklistar pick the wrong type of room by accident?*

Without commenting on the room's layout, Enklistar shambles inside. He throws aside his coat, stripping down to his lighter underclothes, then drops onto the bed.

Kairas also enters the room, taking off her long robe and putting it over the dresser. This reveals plain underclothes which accentuate her childish, curveless body that has narrow hips and almost no chest. Her purple hair is also now fully visible, flowing down to her waist.

She hops onto the bed, facing Enklistar and—Sena's eyes widen at this—the alchemist hugs her. He is already half-asleep, so he must have mistaken Kairas for a pillow.

The little girl herself must just want to partake in some skinship — nothing worrying. Still, Sena cannot help seeing this as a challenge, or maybe bragging from Kairas's part. Why is it that the maid sees her as some kind of rival?

*...Was I lying to myself when I told Erika that I don't love Master Enklistar?*

With that thought on her mind, Sena focuses on the two. Kairas has her face buried on his chest, and Enklistar hugs her as if it were the most natural thing in the world. His eyes are closed and, considering how tired he has been these past few days, he must be already in a deep sleep.



She closes her eyes, that sight burned into her mind. What does Sena truly feel when she sees Kairas doing these things?

I'm angry. I can't stand looking at Kairas. Does this girl think she can just appear in my master's life and get all comfortable with him? Before today he barely talked to me, but we were living alone, just the two of us. I was the only woman in his life. I want to be the only woman in his life. He gave me more than I could ever hope for, and I want to repay him; but more than that, I want him to see me as his equal. I want Master Enklistar to hug me the way he hugs Kairas...No, I want him to hug me tighter than that.

Sena opens her eyes and once again looks at them—her master and the other woman, sleeping peacefully together while she stands by the door. She sighs and hugs her stomach.

"I love him," she mutters, softly and quietly. "I really do love him."

Finally shutting the room's door, Sena takes off her own coat and neatly folds it over the dresser, now wearing only her thin underclothes. She then climbs onto the bed, each movement slow and deliberate to avoid waking up Enklistar.

Crawling up to him, Sena carefully presses up her front against his back and wraps her arms around his neck, hugging him from behind.

*With someone as forward as Kairas, I need to be a bold maid to get his attention.*

Once she settles in, Sena feels Enklistar fidgeting. To her surprise, it seems he was not in too deep of a sleep, because even her careful movements woke him up. With half-lidded eyes, he turns his head backwards to look at the maid.

"...Sena?" he says.

"Yes, Master?" Sena says.

"Is...everything all right?" Enklistar says.

"Very much so," Sena says.

After staring at her for some moments, Enklistar turns his head back around and lays it once again on the pillow.

“...I think this is the first time you’ve touched me.” Enklistar says, his voice muffled since he is facing away.

“I believe so,” Sena says.

“...Is there any reason for that?” He says.

“Master Enklistar has been very troubled since returning from that audience with the king,” Sena says, ever so lightly tightening her hug. “It is a maid’s duty to support her master, so I wish to provide emotional support as well from now on.”

This is not a lie, but it is not the full truth either. Right now, to Sena, supporting her master is most important, and troubling him with matters of love would put further strain on a mind that is already heavy enough with troubles.

“I see...” Enklistar says. “Thank you very much, Sena.”

### III

## Losmerga, God of Souls

Crucial to all human life in this land is the World Soul. At conception, each and every human is assigned a tiny space in this colossal well of divine power. This space remains connected to one during his natural lifespan, and is freed once his mind is finally severed from his body, becoming once again available for a new life to claim.

Contrary to popular belief, one does not extract his own soul from the World Soul; instead, the human body has spiritual capacities that link it to the World Soul, allowing for sapience, free will, and agency over the world. The World Soul’s divine essence never directly touches the physical plane, but it creates echoes that do.

The World Soul is subject to Losmerga, the God of Souls, who resides in the Second Heaven—that much both Enklistar and the orthodoxy agree on. However, since beginning his research on the World Soul, his vision has diverged from theirs on every other aspect.

In the First Heaven lives only the God of Creation, Naklaztor, who crafted both the lower heavens and the physical plane. In the Second Heaven live the few Higher Gods, who crafted the systems of the world and populated the Third Heaven. In the Third Heaven live the Lower Gods; dozens of divine beings who were created by the Higher Gods to populate the physical plane and watch over its balance.

Each Lower God is subject to one Higher God, and each Higher God has multiple subjects. The orthodoxy claims that the World Soul was created by Mosseriet, Patron of Human Souls, who lives in the Third Heaven.

Enklistar, through his research, has gathered sufficient proof to say that Mosseriet and the World Soul are, in fact, the same being. Knowing the orthodoxy, however, it may take centuries for this to be accepted into the canon.

It is undeniable that Losmerga of Soul does have influence over the World Soul—indirectly, to the orthodoxy; and directly, to Enklistar. Such disagreements and Enklistar's willingness to turn his back to the orthodoxy are what prompted King Norkos to sponsor his research.

Enklistar was once called by the king, following a grim oracle, and tasked with understanding the nature of the World Soul. After some months of research, the alchemist found exactly why that oracle had been so worrying.

The World Soul is decaying.

Through analysis of ancient texts—provided by Luchesta's royal archives—and practical experiments to simulate the World Soul's behaviour, Enklistar concluded that in the past decade there have been issues with the partitioning of spiritual zones.

In short, once a person is conceived, the World Soul fragment assigned to him is far larger than normal. This is corroborated by the sudden increase in magical prowess seen in the current generation, where new mages can easily outdo seasoned ones.

At first glance this may seem good, but there is only so much of the World Soul, and these excessively large slots are consum-

ing it faster than they should be. If this continues for much longer, there will eventually be some heavy consequence for humanity as a whole.

Enklistar's best hypothesis is that of a "soul crash": once there is no more free space in the World Soul and a new child is conceived, the whole thing will collapse under the stress of this unassigned soul, killing the majority of humans through a psycho-spiritual shock. After that, it will be reduced to around a tenth of its original size, and slowly heal back to its original form over decades or centuries.

This is what King Norkos has tasked him with preventing, since members of the orthodoxy are too busy discussing trivial matters and care little for that which diverges from the canon.

All these thoughts spin around in Enklistar's mind, almost drowning out his surroundings. The grave creaking of the large wooden doors is followed by a dull thud, meaning they have been closed shut behind him. He is now inside Castle Valthus, stepping on the long red carpet that leads up to the thrones.

Either side of the long room has a row of tall pillars, holding up walkways on the floor above. Those are usually populated by aristocrats, diplomats, merchants, and such; but, right now, both the walkways and the lower floor are completely empty.

Completely, except for the thrones on the opposite end of the room. On the left throne sits no one—that one is the queen's—and on the right one sits King Norkos: a man with a large frame, grey beard, and dressed in red-and-golden robes.

Standing to the right of his throne is a smaller figure, whose features Enklistar cannot discern from this distance.

*Why is the throne room so empty? Where's Altessa? Who's this other one? Is any of this related to the high-security outside?*

Whenever Enklistar came to discuss his research with the king, both of them would go to a meeting room in one of the upper floors, where they would talk alone behind closed doors. All of that was to make sure the subject of his research cannot leak to the outside, as it would cause needless panic at best, and major setbacks at worst.

Is the throne room empty because Norkos has decided to hold the meeting here? That is impractical, if so.

The one who can answer Enklistar's questions is here, so he shelves those thoughts and moves forward. As he walks forward, his footsteps echo through the lifeless throne room, hitting its stone walls, pillars, and arched ceiling. Soon enough, he is right before the king, the only separation between them being the few stone steps that lead to the thrones' elevated platform.

Up close, he can now tell the figure belongs to a small girl. She is wearing a long, plain robe that cover most of her body; its sleeves drape over her hands, and its hood has two triangular pieces of cloth atop of it, reminiscent of cat ears. Her purple sidelocks are long, hanging down to her chest.

*Who's this girl? I swear I've seen her before...*

The girl eyes Enklistar up and down a few times, then gives him a toothy grin and tilts her head. Even more than before, he is at a loss as to why King Norkos has brought this kid here.

"Sir Enklistar." The king says, catching Enklistar's attention.

The alchemist lowers his head; he knows that ignoring the king is unbecoming of a subject. "I apologize, King Norkos. I should—"

"Enough," The king waves dismissively, "Formalities won't buy us any time."

"...They won't," Enklistar shakes his head. "So, why have I been summoned?"

"First, what is the status of your research?" Norkos says.

"I'm on the right track," Enklistar says, "and I've been progressing swiftly for the past few days. I've thought about it, and I should be able to finish it by the end of next month."

The king's features darken. "I see..."

"...Is something wrong?" Enklistar says.

King Norkos extends his right hand to the side, landing it on that girl's hooded head. His burly hand almost completely envelops her small head, and he caresses her scalp through her hood. The girl smiles and nuzzles up to his hand.

“Do you know who this is?” Norkos says, strangely invested in patting the girl’s head.

“I don’t think I do,” Enklistar says.

“Pay close attention,” Norkos says.

Narrowing his eyes, Enklistar scans her features. Most of her body is covered by that loose robe, so he only has a face and some hair to work with.

*Hmm... I don't know any little girls with purple hair, but her face does remind me of someone... Queen Altessa? Wait, no. She looks a lot like Princess Laisha.*

“Uh... Is she another daughter of yours I’m not aware of?” Enklistar says.

The king gives him a soft laugh, but Enklistar cannot help feeling unsettled by it. Despite his expression being usually stoic, the king now looks weirdly mellow—sad, even.

“Close, but not quite,” Norkos says, still rubbing the girl’s head. “This here is Kairas. She is what is left of my dear daughter, Laisha.”

“What is... *left* of her?” Enklistar says, trying to make sense of this ominous statement.

“Yes,” Norkos says. “Our situation is dire so, after much worrying, I sacrificed my dear Laisha to the one god who can help us in this situation—Losmerga of Soul—and begged him for guidance. I received more than mere guidance: Losmerga, in all of his benevolence, incarnated his own daughter into the body of Laisha. Thus, we have a source of divine intellect among us.”

Though Enklistar hears what Norkos is saying, the impact of it has him mulling over the king’s words, speechless and with his mouth partly open.

He looks at Kairas, who smiles at him. This is the child of a god inhabiting the body of a sacrificed princess. She seems very carefree, for someone with such a background.

*Losmerga's child has been incarnated into the physical plane? This is...There are only records of Lower Gods ever sending their children unto us. A god from the Second Heaven doing so may be a first in history.*

“Criticize me if you will,” Norkos says, misunderstanding the reason for Enklistar’s speechlessness, “but do so after finishing your research.”

Enklistar shakes his head. “No, I didn’t intend to criticize you. I’m just in awe that Losmerga would send us his own daughter. Though, now that you’ve mentioned it...Was that sacrifice really necessary?”

King Norkos takes his hand off Kairas’s head, which causes her shoulders to droop.

“Do you expect a god from the Second Heaven to fulfill half-hearted prayers?” Norkos says. “What could I expect from Losmerga of Soul if I weren’t willing to sacrifice what is most precious to me? He would think I am not serious about healing the World Soul.”

Though Enklistar is thankful to the gods—particularly so right now—this kind of reasoning is beyond him. Surely, there must have been other ways for Norkos to convey his seriousness about this subject. Other ways that did not involve losing exactly what he wants to protect. Nevertheless, Enklistar cannot argue with the results.

“In any case,” he says, “I imagine Kairas is here to guide my research, yes?”

“She is,” Norkos says. “Her knowledge has some limitations, since Naklaztor has forbidden the other gods from meddling too much with our mortal affairs, but she will prove useful.”

“Any help is very much appreciated,” Enklistar says, “But...why now? Has something changed? Since you have sacrificed your precious daughter, I assume our deadline has been significantly shortened.”

King Norkos heaves a deep sigh. “Unfortunately, the situation has indeed changed. A spy of mine recently returned from the capital of La Dorai, and he informed me that King Thalber has mobilized all of his royal alchemists and court magicians to hasten the soul crash.”

“Hasten the soul crash?!” Enklistar shouts, a mixture of anger and shock in his voice. “Has Thalber gone senile?! What

does he hope to achieve with that?! He will just kill his own people!”

“Perhaps I put it poorly,” Norkos says, “Thalber merely wants to increase his people’s magical capacity by expanding their souls, and it seems he is oblivious to how that affects the World Soul.”

Feeling the blood drain from his face, Enklistar brings a hand to his forehead. This is exactly why he is the only alchemist of La Luchena working to prevent the soul crash: if there were more people involved, such partial information could leak and prompt fools to unknowingly work towards their own demise.

“...Have you tried contacting him about this?” He asks the king.

“Yes,” Norkos says, “but my warnings have been met with scorn. King Thalber believes I am trying to sabotage his developments so that we can gain a military advantage over La Dorai, despite our current peace. He has been blinded by power in his old age.”

“How much time has this cost us?” Enklistar says.

“Our deadline was already hard to estimate before, and I have little information about the specifics of La Dorai’s developments.” Norkos says.

“And so, it’s best for me to assume it could happen at any moment and finish my research as soon as possible...” Enklistar says, shaking his head at this predicament. “Is the castle’s fortification related to the situation with La Dorai.”

“It is,” Norkos says, “as is the current absence of Altessa and the other nobles. King Thalber showed too much hostility towards my warnings, and I would not put it past him to attempt an assassination.”

“Cautious as usual, I see,” Enklistar says.

“I merely do what I must to protect my kingdom,” Norkos says, once again patting Kairas’s head.

“...” Enklistar silently watches as Kairas pushes her head into the king’s hand, a big smile on her face.



I barely ever saw Norkos and Laisha interacting; but, from the few times I caught it, I could tell that girl meant the world to him. Yet, he decided to sacrifice her to save his people and his kingdom.

Enklistar shoves a hand into one of his pockets, grasping the neck of a small sack. He takes one more good look at the two before pulling it out and presenting it to the king.

“What is this?” Norkos says, extending his hand.

The alchemist drops the sack on his open palm, and Norkos retracts his arm.

“This is the last resort,” Enklistar says. “I was pondering on whether or not to give it to you, but...”

Norkos stops patting Kairas’s head—once again, much to her annoyance—and opens the sack with both hands.

“...Small crystals?” he says.

“About one hundred of them,” Enklistar says. “I managed to make them a bit earlier in my research, and each should protect someone’s soul from the crash, as long as he keeps it close by the time it happens.”

“And why haven’t you made more of these?” Norkos says. “This seems like a good solution, if somewhat impractical.”

Enklistar sighs and shakes his head. “It’s not a solution. All these crystals can do is offset the problem: they give priority to the souls of the ones who hold them.”

“Then,” Norkos says, “if I were to keep one of these near me during the soul crash, I would be guaranteed to survive at the cost of condemning someone whose soul would have been unaffected?”

“*Guaranteed* is a strong word,” Enklistar says, “but yes, in theory that’s what is supposed to happen.”

“Hmmm...” Norkos carefully studies the crystals.

“Use them however you want, or not at all,” Enklistar says. “I trust your judgement, King Norkos.”

“Haven’t you any for yourself?” Norkos says.

“I kept a few at home just in case,” Enklistar says, “but it’s not like I’m eager to use them. I think you’ll handle them much better.”

Norkos closes the sack and puts it on the armrest of his throne.

“Very well,” he says.

The alchemist and the king continue their conversation into the afternoon, discussing the current situation of the research and other specifics.

Once both are satisfied, Enklistar leaves the castle with Kairas right behind him. By the time this happens, the sun has nearly set. He talks to a guard near the castle door, who points him to the tavern Sena has gone to, and follows his maid’s trail.

## IV Harvest

Blown by the wind, a few orange leaves flow downwards and land on the front porch’s wooden floor. Warm-coloured leaves already blanket the land around the house, and they are now gathering by the front door.

A trusty broom in hand, Sena steps into the porch and starts sweeping away those leaves. She knows that in an hour or two they will have overtaken the porch once again but, having finished all of her other tasks, she does not mind idly sweeping against the unstoppable forces of autumn.

It has been three days since she returned from the capital with Enklistar and Kairas. Her master, as usual, has been hard at work during this time—the man has not had even one proper night of sleep.

Kairas, much to Sena’s surprise, actually spends little time in the study. Enklistar consults her for a few things each day, then isolates himself to keep working. It seems that, even with help, an alchemist’s job can be very solitary.

For most of the day Kairas just hangs around the house, sometimes watching the birds and critters outside, sometimes intently staring at Sena while she does her chores. In contrast to how lively she was when interacting with Erika and Enklistar back in Luchesta, she is quiet and reserved when alone or with Sena.

Her expressions are what bothers Sena the most. Yesterday, when watching Sena cook, she had her eyes wide open and her mouth split. She stared at Sena as if she had never seen someone cook before.

*She must have been really sheltered when growing up to be amazed by such a mundane act.*

After sweeping the last few leaves out of the porch, Sena rests her broom on the wall and walks inside. In the entry hall, she spots the purple-haired girl crouched down, staring at the floorboards as if they were the most fascinating thing in the world.

"..What are you doing?" Sena feels an urge to question her.

Kairas turns her head up, locking eyes with Sena. "I just thought this wooden floor was interesting."

"How so?" Sena says.

"We don't have wooden floors where I'm from," Kairas says. "I hadn't realized it back at the castle, but this is quite a clever use of resources."

Of all the ways to describe floorboarding, "clever" is not the first thing that comes to Sena's mind. Maybe she is from one of those desert nations in the south that do almost no woodworking.

"Is that so?" Sena says.

As it is almost time for her to prepare dinner, Sena leaves the girl to her antics and heads to the kitchen.

"Wait a moment, please," Kairas calls out to her.

Sena turns around, and the shorter girl is now standing.

"Yes?" she says.

"Miss Sena," Kairas says, "I know you hate me, but would you mind listening to a request?"

"You...know I hate you?" Sena says.

She is normally not very expressive, and has put particular effort into trying to mask her annoyance at the way Kairas interacts with Enklistar. Just how did this girl figure it out?

Kairas nods. "I can tell that you love your master very much, and that you dislike how I act around him."

Sena now feels three emotions. First is embarrassment at how Kairas knows her feelings. Second is confusion at how Kairas managed to read her so well. Third is anger at how Kairas acted in that way even though she knew her feelings. With this mixture of emotions, she feels her face burning up.

"E-Explain yourself," Sena says.

"Of course," Kairas says. "I'm very sensitive to people's emotions, to the point where I can tell their exact feelings towards particular things. I was just born this way."

"And you expect me to believe that?" Sena says, in a more aggressive tone than usual.

"I did find out that you hate me even though you tried your best to hide it," Kairas says. "Isn't that proof enough?"

Sena feels her face getting even hotter. "W-Well, let's say I believe you. If that's the case, then why did you keep acting that way towards Master Enklistar?"

"Because I felt that would help him," Kairas says. "Enklistar's heart is heavy with his duty and with a strong fear of failure. I could feel he would benefit from having someone with a cheerful and upbeat personality around him."

...So, she did that to help Master Enklistar?

"Is that why you also act that way with Erika?" Sena says.

"Yes," Kairas says. "Erika was very sad with Princess Laisha's departure, so I tried getting on her wavelength to cheer her up."

"Then," Sena says, "you pretend to be a lively girl when you're around them?"

"I wouldn't say it's pretending," Kairas says. "I just like to adapt to those I'm around. For example, I know that cheerful personality would bother you, which is why I decided to be calmer and more serious around you."

“The way you put it makes you seem detached from social matters,” Sena says.

Kairas smiles. “I guess you could say I’m detached from this place in general. Anyway, are you willing to listen to a request?”

“..Yes,” Sena says.

“Great,” Kairas smiles. “So, you’re going to cook dinner now, right?”

“I am,” Sena says.

“May I help you with it?” Kairas says. “I’ve always wanted to try cooking at least once, and I only got more excited about it when I saw you doing it the past few days.”

*She has never cooked before. Not at all surprising, coming from the girl who is fascinated by floorboards.* “All right,” Sena says, “you may assist me with dinner.”

\* \* \*

The table set in the dining room is bountiful—for three people, at least. Sena and Kairas stand beside it, looking at the fruits of an hour of cooking. The maid may have been a little excessive with her cooking today, perhaps wanting to prove her value to her pupil.

Kairas, meanwhile, was very eager about doing this mundane task. Every time Sena asked her to chop something or mix ingredients, she did so with a smile. This smile was different from the ones directed at Enklistar and Erika; Sena felt, somehow, that it was more genuine.

Despite having no experience with these aspects of everyday life, Kairas managed very well to follow orders and do exactly what she was told. Whenever Sena asked, this girl would give her full attention.

“This was a lot of fun,” Kairas says, eyes focused on the plates before her. “Thank you very much, Miss Sena.”

“I also enjoyed cooking with you,” Sena says, “and...I’m sorry.”

“For what?” Kairas looks at Sena and tilts her head.

“For disliking you,” Sena says. “I thought about it while we were cooking, and...”

As Sena trails off, she feels a pair of hands on her shoulders. Kairas is slightly shorter, so her arms and head are angled upwards. Right now, she has on a strangely mature smile that is in stark contrast with her childish features.

“I can’t blame you for your feelings,” she says, “especially not when I acted so familiar with Enklistar. I’ll say it again: I only act in that way because I think that will help him calm down, and I have no interest in taking him away from you.”

“...Right,” Sena nods.

“So,” Kairas says, switching away from that mature tone, “shall we go call him for dinner? Enklistar has been holed up in his study all day, so he must be dying to eat our cooking.”

“Yes,” Sena says.

Just as the two start walking towards his room, a muffled scream reaches Sena’s ears. It is no mere scream, but one of agony.

“...Mater Enklistar?!” she shouts, running up to his study.

Slamming the door open, Sena’s gaze darts around the room—everything seems to be in place—then it lands on the desk that her master spends the days on. His chair is down on its side, and Enklistar is curled on the floor holding his stomach and shaking.

“M-Master Enklistar...” Sena walks up to him, her hands trembling. “Is everything—”

“The pouch!” He shouts through his clenched teeth. “On the desk!”

After a second of confusion, Sena spots a small pouch on his desk and grabs it.

“W-What do I do?” she says.

“Give me one!” Enklistar says through his panting. “Give it to me!”

Sena opens the pouch, finding a handful of pink crystals, each no larger than a finger. Kneeling down in front of her master, she takes out one and hands it to him.

Enklistar clutches the small crystal, his grip so strong that Sena worries his fingernails might dig into his palm. Slowly his shaking fades away and he relaxes his limbs. After spending some seconds lying on the ground with his eyes closed, he sits up, still holding tightly the crystal.

Once he opens his eyes, he looks at Sena, the behind her. She follows his gaze and spots Kairas standing by the door, rubbing her arm and giving Enklistar a worried look.

“Kairas...” The alchemist says with a weak voice. “It hasn’t even been a week. I knew we had little time, but this is...Has it really happened?”

“...Yes,” Kairas says, “I can feel it has.”

“...How many survived?” he says.

“Around one in nine,” Kairas says, “like you had estimated.”

With his free hand, Enklistar suddenly punches the ground—startling Sena—and begins muttering to himself. “Damn Thalber, damn La Dorai...I hope everyone involved is dead.”

“Uh, Master Enklistar,” Sena says, “is everything—”

“Sena,” Enklistar interrupts her, “do you want to know what my research was about?”

“Eh?” Sena is caught off guard. “Well, if you may tell me, then yes.”

Enklistar shrugs. “There’s no point in keeping it secret now.”

And so he tells her everything that has been happening: everything he knows about the World Soul, Losmerga, Kairas, and the soul crash. He tells Sena how the crystal she handed him kept his soul from vanishing, as well as how lucky she is for surviving the soul crash without one.

By the time Enklistar finishes, there are tears beading up in the corners of his. Sena does not fully grasp everything he said, since he delved into esoteric alchemical knowledge to explain some things, but she now understands the gravity of what has just happened.

“So,” she says, “only a tenth of humans have survived this?”

“Only if my calculations are correct,” Enklistar says. “It could be more, but I’m afraid I’m correct about this number.”

“And...all of this is because Thalber A. Dorai wanted to strengthen his army?” she says.

“If not for that fool,” Enklistar says, “I would probably have had enough time to finish my research and employ a counter-measure against the soul crash.”

Kairas, who had been standing near the door this whole time, sits down with the two.

“Actually,” she says, “there’s something I’d like to add.”

“...Do you know something else?” Enklistar says.

Kairas nods. “Remember: I’m the child of a god, so I’m limited in how much knowledge I can share due to Naklaztor’s rules. That being said, now that the soul crash has already happened, I imagine I won’t get into much trouble for saying this.”

“So...” Enklistar says, “what do you know?”

“The souls of newborns began getting larger around a decade ago, right?” Kairas says. “What else happened at around that time?”

“What else...?” Enklistar frowns.

*Around a decade ago...The war?*

“That conflict between La Dorai and La Luchena was settled eleven years ago, wasn’t it?” Sena says.

“Yes,” Kairas nods. “By the end, La Luchena was far more powerful than La Dorai and had the means to annex its territories, but King Norkos decided against that and only made King Thalber sign a peace treaty.”

“Are you saying the peace treaty had something to do with the soul crash?” Enklistar says.

“Not the treaty itself, no,” Kairas shakes her head. “Near the end of the war, Norkos had received a message from my father, Losmerga of Soul, who urged him to kill Thalber and take over La Dorai.”

“But that didn’t happen,” Enklistar says, “which means King Norkos went against the will of a god...”

“He did,” Kairas says.



“So,” Sena says, “was the soul crash a form of divine retribution?”

Kairas shakes her head. “No, or else my father would not have sent me here to help you. Norkos should have taken over La Dorai because he, unlike Thalber, would have been able to stop an underground organization that was messing with the World Soul.”

Enklistar clicks his tongue. “Dammit. So, that organization is the one responsible for the expansion of souls that began ten years ago?”

“Yes,” Kairas says. “They had been working in the shadows until recently, but someone managed to convince King Thalber that supporting them would be beneficial to the kingdom. His funding is the reason the soul crash happened significantly sooner than it should have.”

Enklistar grabs his head, staring down at the ground. “If only Norkos had listened to Losmerga...”

“Please, don’t be angry at him,” Kairas says. “The only ones responsible are the fools who wanted to control the World Soul, and most of them should be dead by now.”

“Dead?” Enklistar says. “What, were they completely oblivious to the possibility of a soul crash? Didn’t they prepare countermeasures?” He shows the small crystal to exemplify.

“They tried to,” Kairas says, “but theirs didn’t work properly. Also, knowing King Norkos, he most likely didn’t use the crystals you gave him, in which case your soul is the only one that was saved by such a countermeasure.”

“So,” Enklistar says, “I’m the only one who killed someone else to stay alive...”

Kairas gives him a dry smile. “I wouldn’t put it that—”

“Yes, yes.” Enklistar waves his hand at her. “I know the implications of what I did, there’s no point in trying to comfort me.”

With that, he droops his head and stares at the floor with a stiff expression. Kairas, apparently affected by her inability to cheer him up, does the same. Seeing both like this, Sena feels the need to say something.

“What now?” she says, addressing neither Enklistar nor Kairas directly.

“What now...” the alchemist mutters to himself, then turns his head back up to look at Kairas. “Any ideas?”

“I believe we should just keep on researching,” Kairas says. “We may have been unable to prevent this soul crash but, once the World Soul heals, it will be susceptible to another one.”

“Right,” Enklistar says.

“We should also go to the capital,” Kairas says. “The people must be confused and scared, and there’s a good chance King Norkos is dead, so we’re the only ones who can explain the situation.”

“Yes,” Enklistar nods.

“Although...” Kairas frowns in thought. “Rather than going together, I shall go alone to Luchesta tomorrow morning.”

“...What?” Enklistar says. “What are you talking about? I’m partly responsible for this situation, and people in the capital know I’ve been working with the king, so I should be the one to explain the situation to them.”

“Enklistar,” Kairas says, “I think you should just stay here with Sena. After all, someone who’s seriously considering suicide shouldn’t be out there stressing himself.”

At first Sena is confused by this statement, but she immediately remembers Kairas’s ability to sense emotions, which sends a chill down her spine. She grab’s her master’s hand and gives him a worried look.

Enklistar averts his eyes to the side, but does not try to break free from Sena’s grip. “...What happened to that whole *we can’t interfere too much* thing?”

“I’ll deal with whatever punishment from my father or Naklaztor once I return to the Heavens,” Kairas says. “I’m saying this of my own free will.”

Enklistar scoffs. “And yet you didn’t use this free will of yours earlier to help me stop the soul crash sooner.”

Kairas sighs. “Enklistar, worrying about the well-being of a single person and doing something that could affect the whole

world are fundamentally different and the consequences of—

“I know, I know...” Enklistar says, finally reciprocating Sena’s grip on his hand. “I’m just bitter right now, please don’t take me too seriously.”

Kairas nods. “I won’t. So, are you fine with staying here to cool down for a few days?”

“...Won’t you have any trouble in the capital?” Enklistar says.

“I may currently have a human body,” Kairas says, “but I’m still the daughter of a god. I can handle myself pretty well.”

“All right,” Enklistar says, “I trust you.”

Almost as if on cue, the alchemist’s stomach rumbles. At that, Kairas giggles and gets up.

“The first step to cheering up is a full stomach,” she says, “and this talk has gone on for so long that the dinner we prepared must be getting cold.”

“...We?” He says.

“That’s right!” Kairas smiles, as if their heavy conversation had never happened. “I want to try doing mortal things while I’m down here in the physical plane, so I helped Sena with her cooking.”

Enklistar puts his free hand on his stomach and looks down at it.

“I could use some good food right now,” he mutters, more to himself than to the girls.

\* \* \*

The pale moon shines up in the sky; the stars twinkle and the chilly autumn winds blow. None of them care for mundane affairs, behaving tonight just as they did before the soul crash.

Sheltered from the uncaring winds by both the house’s walls and the thick blanket, Enklistar lies on his bed, sleeping like a rock despite the stress and guilt he must surely be feeling right now.

Sena is nestled beside him, hugging him from behind just as she did that day in the capital. Unlike that time, however, Kairas

is sleeping in a different room today. She said she will be waking up early tomorrow, and did not want to needlessly bother Enklistar's sleep, as he has been getting little of it for a long time.

Even after everything that has happened, Sena's heart feels weirdly at peace. From what Enklistar said, most humans have died today, and yet she is almost unmoved by this event.

*It would be no use for me to worry about this. Only Enklistar and Kairas and people like them can do anything about this situation: the best I can do right now is support my master.*

It would be a lie to say there is no anxiety within her; namely, she is worried about whether Erika and her other friends from her training days have survived. Statistically, at least a few of them must be dead, and Sena dreads that idea. But greater than this anxiety are her sense of duty and Kairas's words: she has to support Enklistar, especially when he is in such a state.

With that thought in mind, she tightens her hug and closes her eyes, ready to serve Enklistar tomorrow and forever.

# The Goddess of Love at the End of the World

*by /a/non*

What God do you worship? A question only spoken with fear or to inflict fear in our era. What God do you worship - are you an emissary of dark will sent to destroy us? What God do you worship - are you a servant of one of the weak gods, do you know your place or will it be shown to you? There are so few of us now, our planet once teeming with life, with people, is now a quiet tomb growing quieter everyday as the last of us join our loved ones.

In the realm of the gods a war broke out, as it spilled into ours millions were slaughtered. What we saw was almost nothing there would be some disturbance of storms or maybe a disturbing stillness in the air and then buildings would be thrown, mountains would burst, as if with unseen nukes no fire or even explosion just the noise of destruction as structures crumbled and people wailed over their dead. These destructive episodes drove the world mad, at first belligerent countries were blamed but when no government could be reasonably be blamed people began to pursue madder theories. They figured somewhere a scientist had discovered something no else had or could and was wreaking havoc. Optimists hoped this unseen madman meant to warn us of pursuing his research, pessimists believed he was driven mad by the discovery of his weapon and would torment us until his death then release his research and destroy the world. The theories became more wild and useless as the years pressed on and the deaths dragged from millions to tens of millions. No one could do anything cities would disappear in a puff of dust

and blood, those who ran to the countryside seemed just as vulnerable. A nuclear war waged by no one on the entire world any city, any countryside, any person instantly vulnerable to some unseen force of death and destruction.

One day questions were answered as another city was torn apart by small 'dust' storms, people rapidly evacuated as the invisible force exploded sporadically and when a building began to fall from its ruptured foundations it suddenly stopped in midair its windows shattering as it collided with some invisible giant. As the giant shrugged the skyscraper off it came into view stepping fully into our dimension, it was almost a comical sight, there was a golden man bruised and bloodied and his eyes or rather where his eyes should were a field of stars. It let out a terrifying groan, skyscrapers and the ground liquefied and boiled and people in front of it bubbled and burst. It fell to its knees and a blade appeared in its chest then vanished and suddenly surrounding it were 25 giants a mixture of male and female their bodies vanishing under their waist, each wounded in various manners staring intently at their fallen comrade.

A female giant was the first to break their trance-like stare, she looked bewildered and frightened then ran fast from the group shrinking rapidly to the form of normal sized woman naked and fearful she stretched her arm to a group of onlookers then vanished. When she vanished the giants all broke from their trance and most set upon each other immediately reengaging their brutal fight while three split from the group shrinking and chasing after the vanished female. As the three gave chase the onlookers scattered as fast as they could but the 3 raised their hands and evaporated the whole crowd and in their midst the female reappeared but took off with unimaginable speed for the next crowd and this pattern continued as together they killed most of the survivors who hadn't evacuated the city.

The fighting between the giants began to generate earthquakes and their intermittent screams tore apart the landscape and dispersed clouds, even though their fighting was brutal and their fists and weapons held terrifying power and shattered any

material obstacle with ease but as they landed blows against each other it did little more than displace or move them. Their durability made sword fighting look like a wrestling match and the injuries they did have must have been hard won over the years we witnessed the disturbances of their battle.

A silver one wielding a hammer broke from their midst, he glared at them daring any to bring him back into the fray pausing their fighting. Two broke out to challenge him and he swung his hammer knocking the first one down and the second wrestled him to his knees before being beat about the head by the hammer until his nose bled and he fell back. We called the silver one King of the gods, he spoke rarely and refused to let the other gods speak his name much less let us learn it. Satisfied no one would challenge him again he sat and they continued their fight, but surrounding where he rested his hammer their explosive force no longer disturbed the ground and air. Those nearby fled to the safety of his hammer as he stared at the dead golden god.

The fight raged for days the king of gods staring unceasingly at the dead god and the world reaching an apex of terror, people begged the king ceaselessly to intervene and a campsite was set up around his hammer the kings campers looking at the devastation believed they would be the last living humans. In his presence they needed neither food nor water, he was an easy god to worship though he paid his adherents no mind. Bitter at the destruction raging around the world, billions dead now, a section of the campsite broke off and cursed him screaming expletives at the nameless king of gods. He made no movement but clearly understood them as they were destroyed as swiftly as they made their protests, the faithful fearing reprisals against themselves and the loss of the sanctuary of the hammer came down ruthlessly on dissent and doubt against the king of gods master of peace.

It's unknown what exactly the king said to end the fighting but his booming voice was heard by every soul on the planet, gods ceased fighting immediately and the campsite erupted in a roar of praise for the king, save for the high priests of the new

religion who took his prior silence as instruction for their own lives. Except for the king all the gods shrunk to normal human sizes, some fluctuating their size deciding what height they desired for their final appearance. They began to appear around the campsite walking past the hammer milling around the golden corpse waiting for the king. Beasts began to ooze from the gods corpse and the king leapt forward grabbing the corpse and attempting to hurl it off the planet, as the corpse cleared the clouds it slowed to a standstill. The other gods watched patiently and curiously as the king ran for his hammer and then leapt to the sky to smash the corpse through its invisible barrier and off the planet. The campers despaired their loss of protection as the stragglers from the first herd of beasts made their way to them, the quiet priests tried to soothe crowd and Arien minor god of wisdom was the first to take notice of the campers, earning from his future followers the title first god of mercy. There is no formal god of mercy, every group of adherents assigns it to their god but no god has saw fit to take up the title.

Arien tackled one of the beasts and tore out its throat and eyes and held it aloft to the sky, with power not befitting his human stature he breathed a huge flame through his hands the spread quickly across the morning sky turning daylight stark red as the fire raged and consumed beasts pouring from the dead god and spread across the globe. After turning the entire sky red fire poured down emptying the sky and fell on all souls some panicked and ran but no one could outrun it. The fire didn't burn but it entered our eyes, mouths, and ears and after it was expended the chattering of the gods and the cursing of the king of gods became clear to us, the entire planet now spoke one language at the cost of all of our native tongues. Arien spoke to the frightened campers sitting among the ashes of the dead beast:

“Who is ready to worship a true God?”

\* \* \*



Never vow yourself to a god, the rewards are limited but the costs are potentially infinite. The campers who pledged themselves to Arien or remained faithful to the king avoided the worst deals but soon other gods saw what a delight it could be to play with humans. No matter the actual details of your contract or pledge, the gods hold all the leverage and they have no judge to make them beholden to their promises, the only one truly burdened by the contract is the mortal. The reward of a contract or vow is ultimately at the gods discretion.

“I want this.” Something tangible, something obtainable, a loved one brought back, food or drink for the starving or thirsty, vengeance or power, but the costs are limitless service and all too often a reversal of the good fortune requested. What leverage do humans have to request anything else? Orphans make up the bulk of those desperate to sell themselves for power, what divine punishment could be worse than poverty in a dying world? This furthers the suspicion of wandering and unaccompanied children, Rias god of war especially loves to watch the valor of his little soldiers. Steven Garr, a ‘friend’, told me of a town that killed wandering children and children found in destroyed towns, they would even go so far as to slay their own town’s children if their parents died in the hunt.

“They say even if they’re adopted, the loss of their parents leaves them receptive to evil gods, better to let them die as innocent uncorrupted souls,” he said.

Adding the remark, as he always does when on the subject of evil gods, “There are no evil gods, they’re all like that.”

An awfully convenient thing for a thief and murderer to say, his status as friend was a job title not a relationship we would share if I could avoid it. Towns, any cluster of survivors, have setup networks travelers and merchants are registered and vouched for in known networks, there are no strangers anymore not any that a sane town would let them live if they tried to enter their borders. Sojourners, refugees, and all types of wanderers have to seek the friend of travelers, either a servant or contractor to the god of travels, and do all business through him. The

friends of travelers are anything but, who would subject themselves to congregate with beast worshipers, thieves, murderers, madmen, except men of similar character hoping to poach their hunting grounds. I had a town but it was much too far from this ring, no one knew of my town or our list of travelers, worse I was separated from my group and acting completely alone. Doing favors for this ring and sleeping outside of various town walls I've come to hear of Stevens murders. I had little choice but to accept work for and through him, according to rumors he was a coward and criminal of opportunity, wolves don't hunt wolves they hunt rabbits and so long as you were armed well enough you could be certain he wouldn't attack. It's what I told myself when I would catch him eyeing my game or gear. Like the rat bastard is doing now, he's coming towards me.

Eric Sting put away the journal and palmed his pistol, his eyes were sunken and his skin was scarred, he was wiry and looked like a soldier cut off from the supply line for a month or two too long, on his neck hung a leather necklace and a 30-06 cartridge.

"I never got that, are you hiding gold?" Garr said as he gestured to Eric's ring finger wrapped in twine in place of a wedding band.

This was a shot across the bow, Garr had to die. Gold was a precious sacrifice for boons from the gods to admit you had any advertised you had something invaluable on you and to admit you had none advertised a fatal weakness. Everyone had gold, no one inquired about the gold you had except robbers to taunt their victims and inform their conspirators. It said loudly 'do you have gold? Of course you do, we're not worried, it's not nearly enough'.

Eric began to chew his necklace and pull the cartridge to his mouth, in his offhand he reached into his pocket grasping a gnarled bloody branch a beast worshipers' summoning offering, with his right hand he fired a single shot at Garr.

He almost hesitated, bullets were precious there was no guarantee that revealing he knew he was trapped was the right play

at this moment, maybe he could've bided his time but Garr's friends had to be close. Where there was one thief there were always two, where there were two six, is there ever just one vulture to a carcass? His only solace in that split second was that if Garr's friends were here he would already be dead.

He held the 30-06 cartridge between his teeth, Garr was chuckling as the pistol's bullet slowed then tore itself apart, Garr had a sacred hunters shield.

"Even if you were, it's not nearly enough." Garr said.

*THE RAT BASTARD SAID IT! HE SAID IT!* Eric screamed in his head, raising the bloody branch from his pocket.

It was useless in this fight but Eric kept a tight grip on his pistol, Eric didn't have a single weapon that could threaten Garr's shield the beasts summoned by cracking the branch would make short work of it but they'd make short work of Eric too. The branch was a stalling tactic for Garr's unseen friends, they'd not risk losing their prize to a herd of beasts.

Garr just smiled, he opened his mouth to say something then Eric bit the cartridge, light burst from it piercing Garr's shield and straight through his wretched heart Garr's expression turned to terror, it quickly turned to relief as Eric disappeared in a burst of light and he was still standing it wasn't a weapon.

Eric appeared a few feet above the ground at least more than a mile out, the sight lines were fantastic in the plains. Eric felt a pain shooting across his left arm into his chest and face, it was the distinct feeling of using a beast prayer, had he gripped the branch too tight and snapped it? It seemed impossible why would he waste such a precious trump card. Coming to his feet he saw his arm and it became clear what happened, the branch was shot or rather his arm was shot with...another branch? No, an arrow before his conscious mind could come to more conclusions his feet reacted and he ran as fast and as far away from here as he could, over the distance he could hear the howls of a pack of beasts.

As he ran he checked the movement in his arrow pierced arm and dropped the fragments of the cursed branch, that smile Garr

had why would seeing the branch make him smile? Why didn't his Garr's men kill him sooner? What kind of mad men would shoot the branch? The last question made it painfully obvious Garr had no men, rather he must've spotted the branch in Eric's effects rather than the bastard trying to steal or report it to the Cylus temple of the hunt he waited until they requested his guidance on their annual hunt and with their shield in hand all he had to do was start a conflict with Eric and as soon as they spotted the branch they would destroy Eric on the spot and turn over all of his possessions to Garr as a reward for discovering the heretic.

Cylus' hunters! and he was marked by the beast prayer if he didn't dump the curse he would be dead by nightfall, there's no hope of negotiating with the hunters when it came to beast worshipers, their zealots have been known to slaughter captives of the beast worshipers as a 'mercy'. Worse if Garr survived the herd who knows how far he'd go to get his hands on the teleportation enchantment, he had already attempted to kill Eric for far less.

Eric wasn't certain how many hours he had been running when he came across a red eyed girl, no older than 12, barking at a rotting grizzly bear covered in black eyes and oozing pus. The servants of Rias the war god, mostly children, were known to do wild things Rias was more a god of chaos than a god of war and his soldiers were more berserkers than soldiers. Shouting, spitting, barking, hissing, Eric had even seen one of these mad children stab themselves to summon the wild within they were a pitiable and frightening sight no town gave them shelter. You only had to see a mob of these children storm an unprepared city once to appreciate the fear and fury people had for these red-eyed children, and the older they were the more wild and brutal. Eric had seen one in his late teens snap his own hand off his broken forearm to brandish it like a blade, he took eight men down with him.

*Editor's note: It is believed that this story is incomplete. If you are the author or have a more complete version, please post it in the seasonal writ-*

*ing challenge thread.*