

# Conversations in the Tide

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But let's be real for a second. Anybody caught distributing it and changing it without my permission will be mighty good friends of mine, cause I don't give a damn. Publish it. Write it. Read it aloud. Act it out. Yodel it. I wrote it, that's all I wanted to do.

This book is dedicated to my best friend Kay. Without her support and encouragement, this book would not exist.

## Preface

The thing I should make clear is that all of this, everything you're about to read, came into my head so absolutely vividly that I had to write it down. Half of the outline was written in the span of a month in a fury of writing and ideas. The other half took me over a year of thinking, editing, and flashes of inspiration. I've read and reread this book several times over, in various states of mind, making changes even up to the day I finalized this draft. There are parts, especially one part and you'll know it when you reach it, that I find embarrassing, but I also had to be honest with myself. This is the story I thought up. No, it's not even that. This is who these characters are, and the lives they lead. Changing anything, removing anything, it would be a lie. I want this work to be honest and true, even if that means in the end it's embarrassing. The act of creation and sharing with others is in and of itself embarrassing, so embrace it.

This is my personal expression of the DIY attitude and of outsider art. I haven't taken any writing lessons, or run this by a publisher, or talked to anyone who knows about writing books. This is purely my thoughts turned to words as I thought them. I did it for the love of these characters and the love of writing, the sheer joy of creation. That's all the reason I needed.

Now that the book's done... I feel a bit lost. This has been something I've been working on and reading for an entire year and then some. I've never stuck by a project like this. I've left a few things open in case I ever want to come back to this world. But... Everyone reaches a destination someday. The fact you can be sad that the destination was reached and the journey is over is more powerful than the work itself. It shows I cared about this, and I cared an awful lot. I've doubted myself, erased things, tore out sections and shoved others in, but in the end, what I have, I am very proud of. I hope you enjoy it as much as I enjoyed writing it, which is an awful lot.

~Petra

## Chapter 1

Some people would probably call the town of Feymist a resort town, and they sorta have a point. The beach there is clean and expansive. Not very good for surfing, tho. There's many expensive hotels along the boardwalk but they aren't exactly lavish. There's more history in those walls than excess. They'd certainly be on point with the shopping in the busy season; about all you can buy are tchotchkes, beach sundries, and souvenir clothing. Others would call Feymist a college town, and they wouldn't be

wrong about that either. It's home to the largest university on the continent of Windswept, and teaches just about every subject one would want to learn about. The thing is, students mostly live in dorms and get bored of the sea rather quickly. The campus is mostly self-contained, with the surrounding town having little to do with the school. Not to say there aren't conveniently located cheap restaurants to get the student business, but generally the town is indifferent to the university. Like tourism, it's merely good for the economy.

The locals, however, would say it's just a sleepy small town like any other. Sure, there's the beach and there's the college, but it's a closely knit community. Local "celebrities" are shop owners and eccentric folks, with many claiming to be the unofficial "mayor" of the town. If you work at a video rental store full time, most of the town outside of the college knows who you are and will say hi to you while you're out and about. Word travels fast in such a small town; if someone gets in trouble with the law, the whole town hears about it. Largely through the gossipy local newspaper. High school sporting events are a bigger deal than even the college's sporting events, let alone continental teams. It even has its own sort of lingo. It's not the "police station", it's "troop seven". It's not the "boardwalk", it's the "boards". There aren't "tourists", there's only "outsiders".

Then there's people like this gal leaning against a tree near the college, her head raised to the stars. Not a local,

but no one in town would call her an outsider either, despite only being here around two months out of the year. She mostly only interacts with a very specific subset of the population, but people from all walks of life would at least recognize her. She's definitely attained "full-time video clerk" status. It's kinda hard *not* to recognize her, with her omnipresent blue longcoat covered in crusty old patches with worn, meaningless symbols and her prodigious height. She has dark red hair that seems like she pulls that hair back and cuts it off with the sharpest thing within arm's reach every six months or so, because she does. Wonder if she got that scar across her face from being too tired or careless when doing that. She has dumb pointy ears and wears blue jeans, a blue button up dress shirt, and brown boots. Probably the only "fashionable" thing about her is the way her green eyes contrast her hair. Not like she chose them, tho. Like I said, she's hard to miss. If you asked her what kind of town Feymist was, she would probably think for a few moments, then solemnly tell you that it's the most special place on the entire continent. Not what you'd expect from such a tough looking and gruff woman, but then if you knew her you'd just say "classic Hemlock".

Hemlock lowers her head and pulls a paper from her coat pocket. She looks at it, and shakes her head. "Wanted: Monster Exterminator for Feymist University. Unknown monster type, able to pass through the sigil barrier of abandoned catacombs, create fire from nothing,

and cause a wide variety of anomalous phenomenon without being present. Activity is limited to catacombs, commissary, and library. Present license to guards in the alley between dorms and commissary. Description: Fangs, horns, dark, nearly black fur on top of head, unnaturally red hide, bipedal, medium sized. Bounty: \$500.” She stuffs the paper back into her pocket. “Gimme a break. What kinda ‘monster’ walks on two legs and goes to the library? If they actually believe this garbage then this’ll be even easier than I thought.”

She walks past an archway that reads “Feymist University”. She continues on past the quad, down an alley between buildings, down a set of stairs, and comes to what looks like an improvised metal gate stretched across an opening with two armed guards on either side of it. One guard lifts his face up as she approaches and sighs. “Damn crusty Freelancers. Mark my words, this’ll be nothing but trouble. Should've sprung for a Crossguard if you ask me.”

The other guard shakes his head. “Don't start anything, Ed. All we gotta do is stand here until she comes back out. Easy shift, then we get to go home.”

Hemlock pretends to not notice their conversation. “Scuse me fellas, y'put a notice on the Loser Board? Something about a monster down there causing trouble up here?”

“Freelancer Board. And maybe. Let's see your license first. Outsiders aren't permitted on grounds unless you're on official business.”

Hemlock reaches into one of her coat's many pockets and fidgets for a moment. “Yeah yeah.” She pulls out a laminated, cheap looking card and hands it to the guard. “Here, satisfied? Can I go down there and get this over with already?”

“Freelancer license that includes monster extermination verified. Here.” and he hands back her flimsy slip of plastic. “One moment.” He turns and undoes a padlock on the makeshift gate. “You have three hours before we seal the catacombs. Make it snappy.” His cohort just groans and rolls his eyes.

“Should be just enough time for you to play ‘hide the nightstick’ with a bag of donuts. Asshole.” She shoulders her way past the guard before he can move fully out of the way. A steep stone staircase descends from the entrance down into the guts of the catacombs. It takes a full minute before finally reaching the bottom. As she walks down the narrow path, she notices a stream of water running along the side of it. Green and brackish, not seeing life for many centuries. The walls are grimy, definitely not something you'd want to brush up against if you were wearing clothing you care about. Hemlock stays in the center of the path. There's glowing lichen growing between the cracks in the stone in spots. The odd thing about these



catacombs is that you can even see any of this at all. There are no lit torch sconces, no overhead lights installed along the twisting corridors of the ruins. It's lit from everywhere at once, without source. "Damn spooky ruins. Just once can't they make some sort of logical sense? Why do I always have to be the one to go in these damn things while the others do business, anyways. I could be working the crowd or doing a stand-up routine while they prep or juggle or... or... something! But nooooo, I gotta go slay some stupid monster. 'Oh Hemlock, you're so brave and big and strong, and I know we're just friends but may I add 'handsome'? Pretty please go slay the big bad monster? You don't mind right?' 'Heh... why yes, Oak, you go have fun shooting Lily fulla lead, don'tcha worry none. I totally don't mind being covered in monster guts and slime and reeking of sweat and sewage.'"

She comes to an intersection of two branching paths. She reaches into her pocket and pulls out a coin. She flips it, catching it on the back of her hand, and heads left, slipping the coin back into its home. "Ah well. We really do need the money. I'm just thankful it was on the Loser Board at all." She walks further along the path, her hands stuffed in her coat pockets, her shoulders hunched forward. The lights suddenly snap off. The air grows thick, like dense fog. Hemlock blinks a few times and rubs her eyes, but dark it remains. She becomes more alert, snapping out of her slouch, her hand reaching back to the handle of a giant axe strapped to her back. "Turning the

lights off ain't any good if I can still hear... Come and get your dinner, monster. Ain't got all evening y'know." She steadies herself and remains motionless.

That's when she feels a sharp, familiar pain strike across her cheek. The slap resounds in her ears. "What the?" She feels something wrap around her hand and tug downwards sharply, causing her to lose balance, and then finally two blunt blows to her back, causing her to topple over. "Hands?" A stifled giggle echoes off the slimy walls. "Monsters don't have a sense of humor. You may as well drop the darkness and show yourself. Let's talk it out."

There's a moment of silence before a small, quivering voice calls out. "Uhm. Ok." The air thins out and the lights snap back on, and standing before Hemlock is a smallish, scrawny gal, probably about a head and a half smaller than this big oaf with the coat, with thick hair the color of black you see when you close your eyes. You get the impression that the only reason her hair curls almost completely over her small pointy horns is because she doesn't brush her hair, because she doesn't. Kinda seems like she's never had a haircut before, even tho the hair doesn't even reach her jawline, save the back which reaches the nape of her neck and curls up slightly. A real odd duck. The bounty wasn't kidding, either, her skin really isn't a natural shade of red, more like... a small crab apple you pluck from a bush when you see it on a forest trail and want a snack. She's gritting her teeth, proving the

bounty right about her fangs too, but... they seemed to have exaggerated them in the posting. If you weren't looking for them, you could easily miss them. Probably still avoids biting her bottom lip a lot. Her light gray tanktop with a circle in the center that looks like pink is being poured into a bowl, even as blue is drained out of it, hangs almost as loose on her as the super baggy blue jeans she wears. It looks like she could probably fit herself in the pockets of those jeans, which are flopped uselessly over red hi-tops. It's funny how the bounty poster didn't mention that, nor her light purple eyes. She winces when she sees that Hemlock's hand is still on the handle of her axe. "Don't... don't try anything! I'm... uhm, real real dangerous! You said we'd talk it out, remember?"

Hemlock slips her hand off her axe and into her coat's pocket. "Calm down kid, I ain't gonna hurt you. Sorry to disappoint you, but I already claimed this bounty. Lemme guess, those jackass guards outside didn't tell you. How'd you get ahead of me, anyways?"

The girl rolls her eyes skyward and puts a finger to her chin. "Bounty? Like a harvest?"

Hemlock's eyes roll reflexively, and she puts a hand on her hip. "Smartass. Yeah, bounty, as in the price on the head of the monster that's stealing shit and causing weird things to happen upstairs. Ain't no point playing innocent, I had first dibs and you know it."

The waif of a girl smiles and stuffs her hands in her jeans' pockets. "Oh, that's me."

"No, I even tore down the notice, see?" Hemlock reaches into a pocket and yanks out the worn, folded up bounty poster, snaps her wrist and unfurls it with one quick motion so the posting faces this small gal.

The girl shakes her head and rocks on her heels. "No no, I mean stealing stuff and I assume the weird things you mentioned. Do they seriously want to kill me just for stealing some food and books?"

"*You're* the monster? ...I guess you do match the description, somewhat..."

"Yep. The name's Sequoia and I'm not a monster." Her eyes turn to the ceiling once again. "Unless topsiders consider demons monsters. They probably do, no one would talk to me except a cat named Snooker but 'meow' isn't good conversation. Cute tho. Do topsiders converse by screaming and running away? I figured not but y'know. Never been up here before." She gazes up at the woman towering over her and tilts her head. "Kinda weird you're not. Are you some kinda weirdo?"

Hemlock puts her hand over her eyes and rubs her forehead, looking down at her boots. "Stop, stop. Let's start over. My name's Hemlock. There was a bounty posted on the Loser Board saying something down here in the catacombs somehow got past the seal, attacked some

guards, stole a buncha shit, and has been causing weird things like small fires starting out of nowhere, grass suddenly growing real tall, food changing colors, pages in books getting shuffled around before people's very eyes, etc. Scaring the shit outta everyone upstairs, basically. My friends and I could use the money, so I agreed to kill it. Figured it'd be easy money."

Sequoia huffs and rolls her eyes in annoyance. "Look, ok, yes, I *accidentally* started a fire or two. Maybe more, I haven't been above ground around people for awhile. But I put 'em out right away! And that's only because those generic looking dudes in black and blue tried to attack me! All I did was smile and wave and they totally freaked out and started coming at me with weapons drawn! I was kinda scared so yeah, ok, you got me, I put a wall of fire between us. Wooooo so scary. I knew they weren't gonna run into it! Did more harm to me than them trust me, and like... I didn't hurt anyone, I just wanted to scare them away. Worked too. As for the rest, so I stole some books and food and caused weird things to happen in the process. Big deal. Anyone in my situation would. I can't help it if there's such things as 'hunger' and 'boredom' up here."

"Up here?"

Sequoia puts a finger on her chin and looks up, as if peering into her brain to see the past few minutes stored in her memory. "I did say 'demon', right? Pretty sure I did.

If I didn't, I am now. Saying I'm a demon, that is. Wow, my first real conversation with a topsider! Too bad it's with someone sent to kill me.”

“You mean...”

“When I say ‘up here’, I mean I’m from” and her eyes grow as wide as saucers. “Down there.” Hemlock stares just as wide eyed back at her, and a long few moments pass between them, no one so much as blinking. Sequoia cracks first. “Pffft, haha ok so you are a weirdo.”

Hemlock rubs the back of her neck and gives a short, awkward laugh. “Never thought I'd hear that from a demon, just everyone else. Well, we better figure out a way to get you out of here.”

Excitement washes over Sequoia’s face like a crashing wave. “You’re... not going to attack me? I... get to leave? You’re letting me go?”

“The way I see it, you’re causing the problems upstairs by accident and in self defense, and despite what those assholes think, you aren’t a monster. Bounty’s void.” Hemlock shrugs her shoulders and crosses her arms. “Kinda figured there was no monster, but I expected it to be some student practicing shit they ain’t supposed to be messing with. It’d be cruel to leave you down here and I don’t trust those guards to not hire someone who won’t give a shit about any of that. ‘Sides, seems like you need

some help, and I don't have to kill anything. Win-win in my book."

Sequoia clasps her hands together and her mouth gets as wide as her eyes. "Thank you! I've been down here for like a week! I was starting to lose hope of ever getting out!"

"No worries. Just gotta think of a way to get you past the guards without any static. I do still need the bounty money too... Lily'll cave in my head if I don't get paid." She looks around, searching for inspiration. She manages to pull some out of the ether. "... I have an idea. You said you can make fire right? Hit my coat with some of that." and Hemlock slips her coat off and holds it out like she was expecting a bull to charge through it.

"Huh?"

The big gal just rolls her eyes. "I got into a big fight with the fire monster, see? If there ain't any scorch marks on me, then it won't sell. Just... don't set my coat *on* fire. Just get it a lil toasty. I don't wanna dredge it through that nasty sewer water."

"Uhm. Ok, I guess." And the demon reaches out, touches the coat, and a wave of flame flashes up the length of the coat in an instant. Several of the patches glow as the flame travels up it, then dim as it passes. It's slightly singed, but with all the sewed up rips and threadbare parts, who can even tell?

“Yeah, that’ll do.” Hemlock looks around at the walls and floor. “...This won’t tho. Say, how long can you hold your breath and stay perfectly still?”

Some confusion mixes in with Sequoia’s excitement. “I... can’t say that I’ve ever tried?”

“Well, this would be a good time to practice.” and Hemlock rolls up her sleeve, pulls out her axe, stands it up, and grits her teeth as she draws it across a bare part of her arm. It’s not very deep, but it’ll probably leave a scar anyways. Not like she’s a stranger to those.

Sequoia recoils, horror wiping out all other expressions that made their home there. “Wh-what the Hell?!”

Hemlock ignores her. She lets the blood spread on her axe, then she whips it around, sending slashes of splatters on the walls and floor. She rubs parts of her coat in the wound and spreads it around.

“Why’d you do that?!”

“If you were just a student, I could’ve just walked out with you and explained things, but since that ain’t the case, I had to improvise. No way I can kill something with this axe and not get blood everywhere, and I definitely ain’t gonna kill you, remember?” Hemlock reaches into a pocket, pulls out the bounty notice, shrugs, and presses it to her wound until the bleeding stops. She rolls her sleeve



over the wound and bounty notice and hopes it won't bleed through. Or if it does that it goes unnoticed in the dark of night. "They'll come down here eventually to pick up the books you took, and if there ain't blood all over the place, they'll get suspicious. Might even get my license pulled. They need proof of the kill too, and if I'm gonna carry you out, I gotta have this coat and axe bloody. 'Sides, I'm a tough gal. If this is the worst injury I get then I'm also the luckiest."

Sequoia's head droops and she talks into her chest. "I... I get it now. Uhm, thanks, Hemlock. I'm sorry you had to do that."

Hemlock drops her hand on Sequoia's shoulder and smiles as she looks down at her. "Why apologize for something that ain't your fault? Not like you cut me. Life's too dumb to worry about cuts and bruises, Sequoia. Wounds heal, pain is temporary. Life goes on. For a demon you're a real softie. You sure you're telling me the truth?"

Sequoia manages a weak smile. "Now I know you're a weirdo."

"You have no idea. Now c'mon. Lemme wrap you up in my coat and swindle these idiots outta their money. I'll carry you out." Hemlock wraps her comically oversized coat around the slight girl and lifts her up into her arms. She looks down at Sequoia and seems worried. "Gods but you're light. When's the last time you ate?"

Sequoia bends her head into her chest, shaking it. “Two days at least. It's been harder and harder to come up to steal some food now that the guards are wise to me. I've tried going out late at night but... well it is a college.. “

“Poor thing. We'll get you fixed up.”

“‘We’?”

“My friends and I. Let's save the explanations and talking for when we're away from the university. Echoes carry far, and I bet the only sharp thing about those guards is their hearing.” Hemlock briskly retraces her steps through the catacombs. No words pass between the two, only the occasional glance and smile. Finally, they reach the bottom of the staircase leading to the surface. She leans down and whispers into Sequoia's ear. “(Lemme drape my coat over your face. Don't want them seeing a facial tic and blow the whole thing. Ready? When I squeeze you a bit tighter, take a deep breath and hold it, then stay as still as you can.)”

“(Got it.)”

Hemlock walks methodically up the stairs, and squeezes when she's about three steps away from the entrance. Sequoia huffs in a deep breath, puffs out her cheeks, and tries to keep her heart from giving her away. As soon as Hemlock resurfaces, the guards turn their weapons on her. She just rolls her eyes. “What's up, buttercup.”

“Stop! What the hell do you think you’re doing, bringing the monster out here?!”

She scowls back at the shaking guard. “You want a dead monster rotting under your college? Have you even *smelled* a dead monster? Wait til a decade from now and you're still smelling it up to the top of the towers. You never, ever get used to it.” A choking, pervasive stink suddenly overcomes all four of them. It smells like something dead in the deepest bowels of the pit itself. “Besides, I have to prove to you that I did my job, right? You took your time verifying my license, you should at least know that.”

“A head would’ve sufficed.”

“What the hell! Who chops off heads and carries them around? I'm not a goddamn maniac! Plus, I want to give it a proper burial... Everything should be allowed to return to the soil, even this.”

The guard’s compatriot puts his hand on his shoulder and shakes him a little. “Ed... c'mon... it's almost the end of our shift... Look it ain't moving and it reeks... The paperwork Ed...”

Ed lowers his weapon and stands to the side. “Alright alright, we get it. Just... get that thing outta here. You Freelancers must lose your sense of smell pretty quick if you can tolerate that. Guess the lack of showering helps.”

Hemlock seethes at that. "Hey now, that's a really fucked up thing to say. You wanted this thing dead, and I did your shitty job for you. Pay the bounty, or I can just go dump this in the catacombs running under the barracks."

The second guard hurriedly reaches into his pocket and pulls out a wad of bills and drops it on the "dead monster". "Yes ma'am, sorry for the trouble ma'am, thank you thank you please get that thing outta here right away ok thanks."

Hemlock relaxes and gives a sly grin to the nervous but reasonable guard. "Hey, you're alright, fella. Thanks. You and only you have a good evening."

The guards watch the huge woman quickly mount the stairs and turn down the alley. "Say... didja make sure to log this?"

"Wait, I thought *you* did. You're the one who saw her license."

"Shit."

"Do you at least remember her name? We can make up a log from that."

He shakes his head. "Something northern. Dammit. Bergen's gonna have our heads." There's a long bit of silence between the two guards. "What'd I tell ya? Nothing but trouble. Should've sprung for a Crossguard."

## Chapter 2

Hemlock jogs with Sequoia up the stairs, down the alley, across the quad, and past the archway. The instant she passes from the college grounds, Hemlock whips the coat from Sequoia's face. The stink fades, and Sequoia gasps. "Pwah! Thank you, I thought I was gonna turn purple."

Hemlock walks briskly between buildings, working her way through narrow alleys and side streets, avoiding the center of town. "You did real good back there. The stink was ingenious. I can't believe you held your breath that whole time, that was amazing."

Sequoia sucks in deep lungfuls of the sharp night air. "I was like... seconds away from totally blowing the whole thing. Thank you so so much, I've been trying to leave for a week but there's always guards everywhere. It feels good to breathe fresh air. Uhm. I'm grateful but can you put me down?"

"Oh, right. Here y'are." Hemlock sets her down on her feet and motions for her to follow her. "We're not in the clear quite yet. Keep close behind me." After a few more turns, she clears her throat. "So, can you play an instrument?"

Sequoia has to walk briskly to keep up with this giant's strides. "You really *are* a weirdo. After all that, *that's* your question?"

Hemlock looks over her shoulder and grins. "It's a simple enough question. Do you play an instrument?"

Sequoia shoves her hands deep in her jeans pockets and looks around suspiciously. "I... can play the fiddle real good. I learned the scales on a six-string, but I never could play anything on it."

"Yeah? I'd like to hear your fiddle. We can help with the guitar."

Sequoia reaches out and grabs Hemlock's arm. "Hold up. Uhm. Like I said, I'm grateful, but you're acting kinda weird and... well I wasn't totally trusting of topsiders before I came up here, more than any other demon but still, and my experiences up to this point haven't exactly soothed that. You uhm... didn't save me just to make me do stuff, did you? Like play the fiddle? We haven't formed a pact so it wouldn't work if that's the case."

Hemlock's eyes grow wide and her smile fades, then she awkwardly rubs the back of her neck and grimaces. "Huh? No, jeez kid, I'm sorry. I guess if I was in your shoes, I'd be pretty paranoid too, 'specially the way I talk." She regains her composure and smiles. "I just don't like running through the same stuff a buncha times, y'know? I wanted to save my questions for when I'm with my

friends. And I promised you a meal and a lengthy exposition scene, as well as meeting them, so it works out well. You'll get on famously with Oak, trust me. There'll be a buncha other people there too, so you don't have to worry about anyone doing anything messed up. Trust me when I say that no one will look at you twice. Does that sound ok to you? If not, I can explain stuff now and ask some burning questions. Pun intended.”

Sequoia rolls her eyes back up, thinking for a moment. “... Ok. Uhm. Sorry.”

“Nah, no apologies needed. I get it. Anyways, we’re here. Just gotta stow this away quick.” Hemlock drags a crate from further down the alley, then stands atop it. She takes her axe from her back and places it on some hooks hanging just under the roof, in the eaves. She shakes it a bit to make sure it’s on there sturdily, and she hops down, kicking the crate down the alley a bit. “So how’s ‘bout it, Sequoia? Ready to get some grub?”

“You topsiders eat grubs too?”

Hemlock nervously rubs her neck. “Ah... That's a figure of speech... Uhm I think Tabby can find some rotten meat but I doubt she'll pick out the m-”

Sequoia disarms her awkwardness with a grin. “That was a joke, Hemlock. I don’t actually eat grubs.”

Hemlock gives a short laugh. “Oh. Hah. Yeah, you’ll fit in just fine.”

“Uhm? Oh, lemme see your coat real quick.” Hemlock hands Sequoia the coat, and Sequoia just looks at it for a few moments as the bloodstains and singe marks fade. “Here you go. I haven’t been up here... at all, but I doubt bloodstains are socially acceptable.”

Hemlock looks over her coat and smiles. “Huh. Yeah, Oak’ll love you. The entrance is around the corner, let’s go.” and Hemlock leads her around the corner and to a heavy wooden door with stained glass depicting a pig lying in the grass under the hot sun. Sequoia looks up at a sign hanging down that says “The Sweaty Boar Tavern”. They step inside, and the inside is brightly lit, but somehow still feels seedy. There’s odds and ends covering the walls. An anchor, a license plate for Feymist that has the number “6942066” on it, a neon light that says “Cool Beer”, old posters, y’know. The stuff you see on tavern walls. Writing fills the gap between each item, at chair level anyways, the words indiscernible from this distance. A model train follows a circular path along the ceiling of the establishment. Every seat is filled, save two seats at a square table tucked in the far corner of the tavern. The low din of conversation fills the air. Seated across the two empty seats are two girls. One stands up and waves at Hemlock, and the other takes her feet off of the chair she had kicked them up on across from her and stops leaning



against the wall, sitting up straight. Across from the girl still sitting down is a mug of beer with a party umbrella sticking out of it.

The girl waving is a real weird looking gal. I mean, her clothes are kinda normal. Gray hi-tops, ripped up blue jeans, black tshirt with a big gross eye with an x over the pupil, a red hoodie with a faded minimalist sketch of an eye on the back... Pretty typical of folks her age and temperament. Even her purple hair that obscures her left eye and curls up when it reaches the nape of her neck isn't *that* weird for folks like her, but... The fact her ears are atop her head instead of the sides and look like cat ears because they are, and that ridiculous looking purple-tufted tail swishing around behind her are dead giveaways that this is a real goofy weirdo. Makes her stand out wherever she goes, but then, who cares? Those big blue eyes are so bright that you can't help but shrug off the rest of her.

The girl next to her, this is a gal who knows how to blend in. Mostly. She's probably two heads smaller than the big gal walking towards her, but that's not that weird. Smaller than most folks, certainly smaller than the gal next to her waving and even the sheepish gal the lummoX in a longcoat is leading but... someone you'd see on any street. The only really odd part is her choice in clothing. It fits ok, a lil baggy for her wiry frame but that's not too unusual. She wears stone gray boots, dark brown trousers,

a mossy green button up with a sloppy collar and sloppier tie the color of rain on a stormy day. Kinda weird she was able to find a tie the exact color of her hair. That's pretty normal too even, a simple but choppy bob cut, probably her weirdo friend waving her heart out cuts it, because she does, and probably styles that silly sprout looking bit poking up where her hair parts in the center of the top of her head. She's definitely going for a theme here, from the bottom up, from stone to soil to grass to rain. I wonder if it's because of her sun-colored eyes, like... she started from the sun and worked her way down. As if... she's trying to blend in with the world more than with people. Top to bottom or bottom to top, she knows how to blend in... just poorly enough to be interesting by choice.

The girl waving sits down as Hemlock and Sequoia reach the table. Hemlock sits in front of the annoyed looking gal with blue hair and takes a long pull off the beer. The girl crosses her arms and glares at Hemlock. Hemlock ignores her. She wipes her mouth and gives a sly grin. She and the annoyed gal have definitely played this game before. "Hey gals. How'd the show go?"

The girl with the goofy ears waves awkwardly at Sequoia for a moment as she sits down and looks at Hemlock. "Heya Hemlock! Pretty good, honestly! No matter how many times we come to Feymist, the bullet catching act always lands, and tonight we were on fire. Not literally this time. Got more than enough in tips to

cover dinner for tonight. It's a good indication that this should be a decent couple of weeks. How'd the job go? Who's your friend? Didja find any weird trinkets down in the catacombs?"

"Hey, that's awesome. Pretty good on my end too, I-"

The annoyed gal breaks her silence and uncrosses her arms. "Went trawling for sophomores again instead of doing your job?" She turns to Sequoia and gives her a sympathetic smile. "No offense, miss." She turns her ire back onto Hemlock. "Seriously Hemlock, you can't keep focused for like... four hours? We needed that money for the van and groceries! Tips were good tonight but if we don't-"

Hemlock puts up her hands in defense and shakes her head. "I did the job, see?" and she reaches into her pocket and brings out the wad of bills given to her by the nervous guard. She waves it at her friend for a moment before pocketing it again. "Monster slain. ...Sort of. This" and she gestures to Sequoia, "is the 'monster', Sequoia, and you're being very rude by not introducing yourself."

Sequoia puts on a playfully fierce face and makes claws with her hands. "Rawr! I'm the monster!" The girl across from Sequoia laughs a genuine, bright laugh.

"Unbelievable." The girl across from Hemlock reaches across the table and offers her hand to Sequoia. "Heya Coy, the name's Lily."

Sequoia's eyes do the rolling thing again as she shakes the proffered hand. "Coy?"

"Y'know, short for Sequoia? Seh-coy-ah, get it?"

Hemlock turns to Sequoia. "Don't mind her, Sequoia, she loves shortening names. It's her hobby, when she ain't boring you to tears about plants and bugs and shit. Her full first name is Linden, so I guess I can't blame her."

Lily huffs and leans back in her chair, crossing her arms. "Why do you always say that when we meet someone new?"

Hemlock smiles. The game is afoot. "To get a rise out of you. Works every time, too."

"You're the worst."

Sequoia seems lost in thought still. "Coy... I like it, actually. It's real cute."

The girl across from Sequoia breaks her silence and offers her hand to shake. "Hiya, the name's Oak! Pleased to meetcha, Coy."

"C'mon, Lock, spill the beans."

"Soon, soon. Got some menus for us? Our treat, Coy. Way I see it, half the bounty is yours anyways."

Lily pulls her menu back and tucks it under the table. “I’m not giving you this menu until you tell me what’s going on, Lock.”

Hemlock shrugs and stands up. “Whatever.” She looks around and spots a table of four girls who look up at her and turn to each other. She walks over to them, and exaggeratingly leans down over them, giving them a nice view. She smiles at one of the girls and points at her menu. “Scuse me, mind if I borrow this?” The girl wordlessly hands the menu to Hemlock, who blows her a kiss. The girl swoons a bit and all the girls lean in and giggle as Hemlock walks back to her table. Lily drums her fingers on the table and glares at Hemlock, shaking a little as Hemlock sits back down and peruses the menu.

Oak passes Sequoia her menu with a smile. “Here ya go, Coy. I already made my decision.”

Hemlock doesn’t look up from her menu, a bemused look on her face. “Lemme guess, whitefish and gravy? Gonna ask the cooks if they’ll let you hear them open the can this time?”

“Haha, no, you know Harvey won’t let me back there. I keep saying we should just get an electric one for the van.”

Lily flops on the table, being careful to not spill her drink. She looks up pathetically at Sequoia. “Coy... please... save me... what’s going on...”

“Well, I-”

Hemlock waggles her finger as she closes her eyes in mock haughtiness. “Ah ah, you’re gonna spoil my fun. Let me have this.”

Sequoia’s eyes dart back and forth and she leans back in her chair. “-am sworn to secrecy.”

Lily sits up and throws her arms up in defeat. “Fine then. Be that way, Lock. I won’t give you the number of this girl basically spilling out everywhere who came looking for your ‘autograph’. Said she caught our rendition of The Red Octopus last time we were here and wanted a private audience with Captain Capsaicin himself.”

Hemlock gives a deep laugh at that. “Hah! I did look pretty dashing in that pirate costume. Guess we’ll have to work that into the rotation this time. Captain Capsaicin always hits his mark. So what happened to being all worried, Coy?”

Sequoia’s eyes are practically glazed over. “How can I think about anything but food with all these smells. Can’t I just order everything? I’m so hungry I could eat this menu.”

Lily looks Sequoia over. “Girl, you look it.”

Sequoia snaps out of it a little and looks over at Hemlock’s beer. “Why does your drink have an umbrella in it?”

Hemlock lifts the mug to her face, talking into it before taking a gulp, side-eyeing Sequoia. "It's magic. Turns ordinary swill into an island vacation." Oak chuckles at that, but remains silent.

"Really? I wanna try."

"How old are you, kid."

"Twenty."

"Sorry, no can do, buckaroo. Don't wanna get Tabby in trouble."

At this point, a somewhat plump girl with long, curly black hair wearing a white button up blouse, black skirt, and a black apron walks up to the table. She removes a clipboard and pen from her apron pocket. "Hey you three! I didn't know you were in town. Good to see ya again! What was tonight's show?"

Hemlock talks to her beer again. "Speak of the dev- ... person I was talking about."

Oak smiles up at the server. "Heya Tabby, good to see ya! It's our first night in town, so just the bullet catching trick. You know we wouldn't be in town without coming to see you right off. Sorry about not letting you know, they shut our phone off a week ago. Figured you've seen this act a dozen times by now anyways, so you weren't missing anything. Still tho, wish you could've been there tonight. Lily was in top form."

“Aw, I still would’ve liked to have seen it. Not like I could’ve afforded to get the night off anyways.” Tabby seems to finally notice Sequoia. “What’s this? Hemlock hon, isn’t she a bit... small for you?”

“You know I only got eyes for you, babe. This is Sequoia. She's just a friend. We had a good show and I collected a bounty so I figured I'd treat her.”

“Yeah, eyes only for me, and that girl with all those piercings after that last concert you did, or the girl with the forked tongue *during* Oak's magic show, or-”

“Ah you know that’s just getting the crowd...” and Hemlock waggles her eyebrows, “warmed up.”

Tabby chuckles. “Scoundrel.” She reaches her hand to Sequoia to shake. “Well, it's good to meet you. My name's Tabby, your server for this evening, and I've been friends with these three for... gosh... what's it been, seven years? Eight? I have to say, I thought I knew all the girls like us in town, but I ain't never seen you before. Are you from the university? I haven't seen you around campus.”

Sequoia looks deep in thought again. “Sort of? I mean, that’s the first place I’ve been to up here.”

“‘Up here’? Are you from that frozen continent down south?”

“No, I'm definitely not from anywhere frozen. I guess you kinda could call it the south tho?” She grins wide



enough that you can see her fangs. “The *deep south*.” Oak laughs.

“I... see. Well, I’ll be happy to get you folks going if you’re ready.”

Hemlock looks deeper into the menu. “Definitely another beer, strongest on tap and keep ‘em coming, and for dinner I’ll have... leeeeeeeet’s seeeeeee heeeeeere, liiiiiiii’ll haaaaaaave-”

Lily closes her eyes and grits her teeth. “For fuck’s sake.” Oak laughs again.

Sequoia flops over her menu, onto the table and rolls her face towards Hemlock. “Please for the love of everything order already or I’ll tell Lily everything right now.”

Hemlock tsks. “Fine fine. Spoilsport. I’ll have the steak and potatoes, rare.”

Tabby just grins. “Sorry, we only have common steak and potatoes.”

Oak leans back in her chair laughing. “Haha, that was terrible! Trying to horn in on our act? I’ll have the chicken sandwich and fries. Hold the onions.”

Tabby smiles sweetly at Oak. “That goes without saying.”

Lily hands Tabby the menu. "And I'll have the burg' and fries. Thanks Tabby."

"And what about you, Se-"

Sequoia's words only barely manage to stay ahead of her excitement. "I want the shepard's pie and the soup dee jower and the flatbread pizza and the onion rings and the mac and cheese and-"

Tabby's good, but even her pen can't keep up with Sequoia. "Whoa girl! Save some for the other patrons! Those legs as hollow as those horns?"

"Sorry, I'm just like... starving. Literally. I may not make it. I really do want all that food tho. And a mug of tap water. Not a glass, it'll shatter. In a mug please."

"...Odd request for an odd girl. Sure thing, sugar. Y'all sticking around for a bit? The rush'll end soon and I can chat then."

Hemlock waggles her eyebrows again. "You know it. Besides, we got some talking to do that'll take a bit anyways."

Before Tabby can leave, Sequoia tugs at her apron. "Wait wait, what's this number next to the food on the menu? Is that how many I get, or how many bites are in it? Like... I only want one shepherd's pie but I want way more than... 11.99 bites. How do you have .99 bites?"

Tabby gives a short laugh. "If you're able to tell a joke that bad with a straight face, no wonder you're friends with these three. I'll be right back." And she heads back to the bar.

"I was serious..."

Oak folds her arms over the table and leans forward. "That's how much money the food costs. If you don't mind me asking, and tell me if I'm being rude, but do they not have money in Hell? Because like... I figured you'd need to pay money just to breathe the air."

Sequoia's attention is on Tabby putting the order in. "We learned about money in grade school topsider culture studies but we don't have a use for it ourselves." Satisfied, she turns to Oak and tilts her head. "What'd she mean by 'girls like us'?"

Lily shoots Hemlock a look. "Did you not tell her what kinda place this is?"

"Nope."

"Lock! This really isn't the sorta place you should take folks if they aren't y'know, expecting it! Why didn't you tell her!"

Hemlock laughs, smiling broadly at Lily. "To see her and your reactions. She's kinda spoiling it by not noticing, but thanks for picking up the slack."

Lily hangs her head, shaking it slowly. "Of course."

Sequoia leans in towards the center of the table. "Do all topsiders speak in riddles? What kinda place is this where you're so upset? Seems like a normal place, mostly. This could be any social club in Hell, really. The writing on the wall is a cool touch. Can just anyone do that? Or do you have to like, work here."

Lily looks a bit puzzled. "You don't see anything unusual? About the people here?"

"Nope. Everyone here seems to be pretty much like the books said." She nods over at the table Hemlock got her menu from. "That girl over there even looks like one of the pictures in this junior high textbook I had. 'Cept the clothes. The only unusual looking one is Oak. Uhm, no offense."

"None taken."

"No no, not like that, I mean..." Lily reaches under the table, takes Oak's hand and holds it on the table. "I mean like Oak and I, or Hemlock and basically any girl with a pulse. Y'know... everyone here's a girl and... together?"

Sequoia's eyes press into her brain. "...So?"

Lily's head droops, and she lets out all her breath at once. "Do I have to spell it out? It's a lesbian tavern?"

"...So? Is liking other girls unusual up here?"

Hemlock leans back and puts her hands behind her head. "Not as much as Lily makes it out to be. There's a few places and a few groups of people that are pretty closed-minded, but for the most part it's only juuuust unusual enough where it's noticeable, but not objectionable. Feymist tho is about the queerest place on the continent. That's the town we're in now, if you didn't piece that together from the university. We even have a whole district to ourselves here."

Sequoia settles back in her chair, gripping the sides, anxious to get her food. The conversation's at least making the time go by faster. "Do topsiders care a lot about stuff like that? This is common enough it wouldn't even be worth mentioning in Hell. The books back in school didn't really say much about topsider mating customs, only how to twist perverted summoner's desires against them."

Oak gives Lily a wide smile. "Lily, when we die can we go to Hell?"

Lily buries her face in her hands and shakes her head. "I can feel the fire already."

Sequoia vigorously shakes her head. "Oh you don't want to do that. I've never been in the... Business District of Hell, but Mahog, my... I guess the closest thing up here would be parent, but in truth they're my creator, told me it's not a pleasant sight." She leans in close and lowers her

voice. "What gave away that I'm from Hell anyways? The horns? I thought I covered them up well enough."

Lily goes back to drumming her fingers and shaking, the intensity of both picking up with every moment. Oak picks up where Lily cannot. "That and the slight sulfur smell for one. I have a buncha books back in our van about demonology, rituals including pact-summoning, demonic history, that sorta thing. Never tried to summon one myself tho, seems really cruel. I just find demonic lore fascinating? I always pictured demons as just another type of person, and I know I wouldn't want to be forced to do something."

"I... I didn't expect a topsider to see it that way! It is cruel!" Sequoia's eyes grow wide and she starts talking faster and slightly louder. "Once you go through the classes and get your credits, you can just be beamed up to any asshole's lab or dungeon or whatever creepy place they have set up! Just picture that! Trying to relax and get some reading done and you get the call and half a minute later you're surrounded by blood and skulls and you can't walk past some stupid chalk and salt that some gross nerd drew way too small for you to be comfortable and they're trying to form a pact to make someone love them or destroy some enemy of theirs or whatever topsiders care about? You don't even get to walk around and enjoy being topside!" She notices a few glances from others around her and lowers her voice to her usual cadence. "I

usually either skip class or sleep through them. Used to, I guess.”

Oak rubs the back of her neck, wearing an awkward smile. “That's a good point, how are you here without being bound, anyways? Don't get me wrong, I'm glad you are, but that shouldn't be po-”

Lily throws her hands up in the air and bursts. “Ah I can't take it! You win, you two. I won't call you Hemmy for a week, and I promise not to tug your tail when you hog the blankets, Oak. Anything, just please just tell me what's going on!”

“S-ranked that mission. Good teamwork, Oak.” and Hemlock reaches across the table to high five Oak. Lily shoots Hemlock a dirty look. “So I go down in the catacombs, see, and everything's going as you expect. Then Sequoia here somehow turned off the lights, you know how those spooky old ruins are, always lit up like that, and started slapping me around and messing with me. At first I thought she was another Freelancer, looking to steal my bounty, but then I looked closer and realized she *was* the bounty. She apparently was causing all the weird unintentional magic stuff just from sneaking around and trying to get books and food and stuff. Any time she tried to leave the catacombs, security would attack her, probably on account of her looks. Damn bigots is what they are. As if a monster would wear clothing and steal things from the library. Probably would treat goblins

and kobolds the same way. So anyway, we talk it out, I decide to sneak her out, I left some of my blood on the walls and floor to sell it, she lit my coat on fire for a moment, we managed to fool the guards pretty handily through team effort, and bogeyed with the money. That's pretty much it."

Lily sighs and leans back in her chair. "Yeah, I can picture the university doing stuff like that. They're insanely vigilant about keeping outsiders out. Sorry for doubting you, Hemlock"

Oak's tail twitches in annoyance. "Those folks at the college are real jerks. If it makes you feel any better, they don't treat topsiders kindly either. In addition to all that, they hoard all that knowledge then force people to keep paying them ever increasing amounts of money for basically their whole lives to read any of it, and the security will beat anyone they catch on campus who isn't a student or there on business like Hemlock was tonight. You're giving those lectures anyways, you morons! You got like ten empty seats! I don't care about some dipshit paper with a seal on it, I just want to learn! Unbelievable. You uh... didn't happen to bring any of those books with you, did you?"

"Nope. Everything happened so fast..."

Oak crosses her arms atop the table and leans in a bit. "Ah well. Nothing to be done."



Lily furrows her brow. "But it's strange that you were down there to begin with, Coy, let alone able to sneak in and out. Haven't those catacombs been sealed up since like... they built the university three hundred years ago?"

Sequoia shrugs. "There's another seal deeper in the catacombs that opens up to an oubliette connected to the kitchen. With how poorly drawn those sigils are, it's a miracle no one's opened them sooner."

Lily looks even more confused. "Are the dorms really so expensive that you decided to squat in some smelly old catacomb?"

"Probably weren't there by choice, were you Coy?"

Sequoia nods and looks around the room. "Yep. I was in my dorm back home, minding my own business, and then I heard a pop, and found myself in a room hidden deep in the catacombs. It wasn't anything like they said in class. They tell you there's a voice that lets you know you're going topside and what the summoner wants, then a bright light surrounds you, and you get thirty seconds to put your 'game face' on and prepare what to say, how to look, how you'll twist the summoner's commands against them. You're not even supposed to be able to be summoned until you pass your classes. That's when I noticed there was no circle, no summoner, and no band around my neck. Mahog but I was confused and scared. I stayed there for a long long time until I felt... really weak

and sick, then I thought back to grade school when they taught us about 'hunger'. That shouldn't be possible either, as far as we're taught anyways. We're supposed to still be ethereal when we're summoned, not solid. Eventually I ventured out, and kept going until I saw the seal, undid that without any troubles, and well... you pretty much know the rest."

Lily gives up. "There's so much of that I don't understand."

Oak continues on, oblivious to Lily's confusion. "Well, I know Mahog was a demon general back during the Reveal... But to tell you the truth, Coy, they don't really have any books on demonic culture here. I had no idea there were even schools and classes, let alone dorms. Or even the freedom to skip classes! My idea of Hell was you're just forced to do whatever the people in charge want you to do."

Realization finally dawns on Lily. Her eyes widen, and her face and mood pick up. "Wait, the whole 'you're from Hell' thing wasn't a shtick you were doing with Oak, you really are an *actual* demon, not super into body mods or cosplay?"

Sequoia glances up, pulling the ideas out of her brain before they have a chance to settle in. "Body pods? Crossplay?"

Lily shakes her head and leans back. "Nevermind."

Sequoia looks around nervously and lowers her voice. "Yeah uhm I am a literal demon from Hell. Uhm. So uhm." She grips the edge of the table and drums her fingers nervously. "Like I was telling Hemlock, I'm a little paranoid about topsiders. I'm grateful for the meal and rescuing me and all but I still am a lil on edge. I... just want to ask some questions, is that ok? Like... Why aren't any of you freaked out by me being a demon? Why do you have a buncha books on demons including rituals around them? It's kinda got my hackles raised. Uhm. No offense."

"None taken."

Sequoia seems to relax a little, leaning back in her chair and stuffing her hands in her pockets. "The three of you seem like decent folks, like Oak getting the cruelty of summoning is heartening, but... you have to get where I'm coming from, y'know? My relationship with topsiders has been pretty one-sided til Hemlock, and if I passed my classes it was gonna be two-sided in a very awful way. Why are you so cool about my whole deal?"

Lily crosses her arms and gives a warm smile. "Well for one, I didn't even think you were a demon until just a few moments ago. That just proves to me that you're like anyone else. It doesn't matter *what* someone is, only how they treat others. If you don't open your mind and heart to new possibilities, even impossibilities, how will you ever learn anything? How will you ever be able to share your heart and feelings with others? If anything, I think it's real

cool and interesting. We love meeting new people and learning about how they live their lives, their hopes and dreams, their stories, and sharing our own way of life and stories.”

Hemlock finishes her beer, turns the mug upside down on the table, and wipes her mouth on her coat sleeve. “I’m from a village up north that had just about every type of person you could imagine. I was raised by an orc, lived with goblins, kobolds, dryads, other half-elves like myself, etc... y’know, types of people too many other types of people look down on. A lot of people see those folks as monsters with a smart mouth or results of ‘unnatural unions’. Those same folks up here probably think that way about demons, as you’ve seen. That’s enough for me to give you the benefit of the doubt. ‘Sides, judging from that fire and that darkness you whipped up, you could’ve really hurt me if you wanted to, and all you did was slap me a few times and trip me because you thought it was funny, and it was.”

“As for me, well, I know what it’s like to stick out like a sore thumb.” Oak twitches her ears and swishes her tail around to punctuate her point. “I’m also a hedge witch. Purely self-taught from books, manuals, scrolls and the like we’ve picked up from relic retrieval jobs from the Loser Board, dumpster diving in places like the university, trades with other practitioners... Witchcraft isn’t super common up here, but common enough I’ve picked up a small

library. Even a loser like me can learn, if she's dedicated enough. And witchcraft kinda goes hand in hand with demonology. It bucks the traditional goddess-centric narrative you'll find in just about every other aspect of life, and paints a sympathetic view of demons. Everyone's so into the goddess and so down on demons that there's gotta be something deeper. It's... kinda cartoonish how the goddess Cecilia is depicted as pure goodness and demons are described as pure evil? I sympathize with folks no one else bothered to understand. I've never used a ritual from any of those books either, just wanted them for their knowledge. Well, no rituals involving demons or summoning anyone.”

Hemlock crosses her arms and closes her eyes. “When these goody-two-shoes took me in, I was damn near feral. My clothes rags, my eyes wild, dragging my father's axe behind me as I crawled out of the woods. I even ran up and stole their pot of beans and ran back into the woods with it.”

“That was our only cooking pot, too!” Lily huffs.

Lily’s ignored. “If a wild animal knows there's gonna be food somewhere, it'll keep coming back. So did I, bringing back their cooking pot and tapping it in front of them. They could've just scared me away, but they told me to take a seat and eat with them instead.”

Lily flashes a grin. "We had to use single syllable words spoken slowly for her to even understand. Still do."

Hemlock droops her head and slumps her shoulders forward. "Way to ruin the mood." She picks herself back up and trudges forward. "Anyways, that went on for a few nights til I started to come to my senses and get some of the wild out of my brain. Then they took me in, and it's been seven years since then, traveling around the continent putting on shows and playing music for folks. That's what that fiddle business was about. We like to hear others' music too. It ain't worth talking about how I got to be feral like that, a story for another night maybe, but they didn't just save my life, they gave me a deeper happiness than I ever known before. They made me a better person, and I owe them big time."

Oak laughs nervously and rubs the back of her neck. "Hey now, c'mon, that stuff's embarrassing."

"What she's trying to say, Coy, is that sometimes you gotta take a leap of faith in people." Lily waves her hand in front of her face. "We should've been terrified of her. Big gal like that with an axe bigger than us with a truly wild look in her eyes? Who wouldn't be? But... we saw her, and saw someone in need. She didn't menace us, she only wanted some food. So we shared what we had, as everyone should. Once she came to her senses, we just sorta... clicked. Does you being a literal demon freak me out? Not really, you seem pretty normal. We don't care

about stuff like that. Sometimes, Coy, life pushes you into the mud to save you from being struck by lightning. You just don't notice the lightning til after it chars the ground behind you. I'm not going to pretend to know how you feel, but I'd like to hear about it and learn. We all would. I can't make you trust us... You totally have no real reason to either, besides us being friendly. I get that. I just want you to know we're sincere, that you're safe, that shit in the catacombs is over, and... if you wanted to walk out of here right now, none of us would stop you, altho we'd give you our number if you wanted to reach out." She laughs and gets a sly look on her face. "Well, walk out of here after you've had some food anyways. I *gotta* see how much of that food you can actually get down!"

Sequoia hangs her head. "I... I knew it. The three of you aren't like the books and teachers say at all. They tell us you're all lazy, greedy, and will do anything, use anyone, for personal gain. Not even use just us, but each other too. That's all I've heard my whole life and it felt so... forced. But when I got out of the catacombs and was attacked and screamed at I doubted what I've always believed... And now look, I knew I was right..."

Oak continues rubbing the back of her neck, giving a weak smile. "Not everyone's like us? We may be the weirdest people on the continent? But people aren't all bad either. Most folks are simply... indifferent. Too

absorbed in their own struggles and problems to make the time for others.”

At this time, Tabby comes back with a tray of drinks and sets them out. “Hemlock darling, Harvey's cutting you off after this one so make it last ok? He's still pissed about the last time you were here.”

Hemlock closes her eyes in annoyance and crosses her arms defensively. “I ain't sorry, those assholes deserved it. I'd do it again in a heartbeat. I wish this was a dockside place so I could've tossed 'em in the drink, one in each hand. I'll just have Oak order some and I'll drink hers if that's what it takes.”

Sequoia dips her finger in the mug of water, and it starts turning black, steaming hot, and smelling strongly of coffee. It then turns lighter, as if a bit of creamer was poured into it. She lifts it to her lips and blows on it a little before taking a sip. Every head at the table turns to her and every eye grows wide. “What'd those two people do?”

Tabby just stares agog. “Nevermind that, how'd you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Turn that water into coffee?”

“Huh? Uhm, magic I guess?”



Tabby shakes her head. "I know that, obviously, but like... whenever Oak does, she always has to chant or use some weird items like gunpowder and bark or charcoal or something. Why didn't you just order coffee if that's what you wanted hon?"

"This is just how I'm used to making it."

Tabby eyes Sequoia over doubtfully. "I'll... be back in a moment with your food."

Oak stares wide eyed at the coffee. "That... that's amazing. You don't have to use components or draw sigils?"

"Components?"

"Materials needed to cast magic. No one up here can use magic without them."

"Seriously? That sounds kinda annoying. This is so simple that it doesn't even make me tired or hungry. No weird effects either."

Lily pales and leans back a bit. "You mean... backlashes?"

Sequoia puts a finger to her chin. "Backlashes?"

Oak nods. "Unintended and unpredictable reactions and results when a ritual is used that rewrites reality. Such rituals, and their backlashes, are extremely rare up here because they're so dangerous and require enormous

effort. Powerful, sure, but... Nearly uncontrollable. Only used by those who are desperate. Or cocky. Or both.”

Sequoia wraps her hands around her mug, letting the warmth seep into her hands. She puts her elbows on the table and leans forward. “That sure sounds like it. It's kinda complex, but simply put, whenever I do something stronger than just some basic, simple stuff, something unpredictable and weird happens. It's never real bad, it's usually something harmless like... something nearby turning an unnatural color, or music playing from nowhere, or a book turning its pages on its own. About the worst I ever saw was when I accidentally made a patch of the water in the catacombs boil.”

Lily scratches the back of her neck. “Is that normal in Hell?”

“Sure, I mean not backlashes but being able to manipulate the world around us easily is something we can all do once you're old enough to learn.” She takes a long sip of her coffee and her face takes on a somewhat serious shape. “Hell's essentially a realm of energetic nothingness. A void with no substance, but energy we can use to create and shape the environment around us however we want, y’know, so long as it's allowed. Mostly, we just create things, like houses, schools, books, instruments, etc. You get the gist. I'm actually really surprised that you topsiders found a way to manipulate reality? I thought that was something that was the

domain of us and Cecilia. How to explain... I don't know how it is for you, if you've ever done such a ritual, but for me it's like... the universe giving me a ball of mud. I can get the shape pretty much how it wants, but a little bit of that mud leaks between my fingers. That's not quite it... It's... hard to explain. Lemme give you an example.” And Sequoia puts down her coffee, raises her hands so her palms are facing each other, and a popping sound is heard. Then an arc of electricity crackles between her hands, followed by several more arcs before she stops. Nearby, the sound of a balloon deflating is heard as someone’s souffle deflates. All activity in the tavern stops cold, all eyes focused on the display Sequoia just produced. Tabby, carrying the tray of food, just stands mouth agape, and the tray starts to slide out of her hand. Sequoia stands up and raises her hand. “Nonono!” Another popping sound is heard, and suddenly the tray of food is floating a few inches above Tabby’s hand, perfectly straightened out. “Phew, that was a close one.” Hemlock rubs the part of her arm that she cut earlier.

Tabby just utters out “Whoa.” She taps the edge of the tray, causing it to glide slowly towards the gals. All eyes are following the tray on its journey to the table. Tabby seems to snap out of her stupor, and she runs her hands rapidly under then over the tray of food. “Haha, that’s real! Holy shit!” She taps the edge of the tray again, and again, causing it to pick up momentum.

Sequoia puts on a devilish grin. "Careful, I just levitated the tray, not the food on it. In fact..." and the tray raises up out of Tabby's reach, until it nears the table, where it slowly lowers and lands dead center between the four of them. There's a long moment of dead silence before the whole tavern erupts in cheers and applause. Activity resumes in the tavern as everyone starts talking about what they just saw.

Oak stares at Sequoia for a moment before raising her hands to her chest and grinning madly. "That was... so cool! I can't even process what I just saw!"

Lily shakes her head. "Incredible. We've seen a lot in our short time on this Earth, but nothing like that without extensive preparation."

Hemlock works her arm out of her coat, rolls up her sleeve, tosses the bounty notice in a pocket, and stares at the place she cut her arm. It's totally healed over, not even a scar remains. "Hey uh... gang? That cut from back in the catacombs is... uhm... gone?"

Sequoia takes a big bite of her shepherd's pie and speaks between chews. "That's probably that weird effect I mentioned. Uhm, backlashes, right? I'm glad it was that and not something weird like turning the inside of someone's bread into soup. The universe must like you. So uhm. You all were talking about Freelancers and a losing

board? What's all that about? Is a losing board like... a spirit board?"

Oak shakes her head, waving a french fry as if dispelling the confusion with a bundle of sage. "Loser Board, and nah, nothing like you're thinking. We're not signing a pact or communing with spirits or anything. A lot of folks out there need help with things they either don't have time for, or they don't have a dedicated staff to help with. For example, last month someone posted on the Freelancer's Board, we call it the Loser Board and we'll get to that in a minute, asking for folks to build them a workshop. They had the materials, but no one to actually build it, and they had to work their job and had no time for it. So, they put a price of what they thought was fair that they could afford, and people who are licensed to take on these jobs responded and did the work."

"We call it the Loser Board cuz it's for losers like us." Hemlock stuffs a potato chunk in her mouth. "The money ain't fair when you compare it to the cost demanded by a guild, but... that's really, really imbalanced. That's all these folks have! You gotta consider that when you look at these jobs. Like that workshop. The Builder's Guild would probably ask about... ten thousand dollars. Roughly. Which, since money's pretty new to you, is a lot. A whole, whole lot. I get it tho, I don't hold it against them. Those guild members went to school for that shit and are held to a higher amount of responsibility and have their own

problems. They have to guarantee their work for one, altho you usually get better quality work from a guild too. If they fuck up, they have to do it again for free. If we fuck up, well... sorry bud, shouldn't have posted on the Loser Board I guess. Then again, if they get injured on the job they're taken care of, while we're shit outta luck. We got a thing worked out with the various guilds that they get first dibs on any job, and anything they don't take gets filtered down to the Loser Board. We ain't scabs, the unions have to sign off on the approval to the Loser Board. Anyways, that guy could only afford to do it for a thousand bucks so it went on the Loser Board and we took it. We needed money for groceries and fuel, enough to get to the next town anyways. Sure, that job was worth way more than a grand, but that's the thing, that guy saved for a year to get that thousand, and it was basically all his savings. He needed that workshop to continue doing his trade, which ironically enough, was woodworking. That one thousand to him was more than ten thousand to the folks who would hire the Builder's Guild. The Builder's Guild, rightfully so, wouldn't take a job for so low, so we did it. We did a damn good job, too. The joists alone will probably outlive me. We don't need ten grand. We don't even usually need one grand. Following me?"

Sequoia rolls her eyes into thinking mode while she gnaws on the flatbread. "I'm pretty sure. He's poor, you're poor, so you understand his position and did the job for cheap since you only needed a little bit of money. Those

guild guys are more educated and only do that for a living, so they get the rich folks and pass the dregs down to you.”

“Exactly! See, you’re catching on.”

Lily holds up five fingers. “There's five basic types of jobs that get posted up on there. Carpentry, farming, relic retrieval/spelunking, arbitrating for minor feuds and disputes, and monster extermination. All of these are skilled jobs, y'know? It's why there's a guild for each of those, sorta, only, well. You get the picture on that.” She talks between bites of her burger. “So because they're skilled jobs, you gotta prove you can actually do them. Sure, guilds usually do a way better job than Freelancers, but if you allowed a person that can't tell fertilizer from dog dirt to do a farming job, the Loser Board would lose its status as dependable labor for the needy, and no one would use it. It'd all fall apart. And the three of us have the royal flush. Uhm, that is, if you don't have poker in Hell, we have a license for each. The thing is, we don't even like taking them. Most of 'em are ok, not our thing, they’re useful to folks, but the monster extermination especially is just... depressing and awful. Oak and I get kinda queasy by violence, and Hemlock likes a good brawl but... killing things, even monsters, is horrible.” She hangs her head and gazes at the last few bites of her burger sadly. “But the way things have been going lately, we've been depending on it more and more.”

Sequoia looks up from the soup she's shoveling into her mouth. "Uhm, what's been going on lately where you take these jobs you hate?"

"I think our act is finally getting stale. All the other troupes are charging to see their acts too... So it goes I guess... We had a good run..."

"Act?" Sequoia tucks into the mac and cheese, having demolished several of the other dishes.

"Ah! Our true passion!" Oak beams. "We're a traveling troupe of artists, actors, stuntgals, comedians, clowns, and musicians! We bring the entertainment to you! All self-taught, all unprofessionals. We ramble about the Windswept continent in a van, stopping wherever we think we'll draw a good crowd, get approval from the local leader to perform, then we set up wherever there's enough space to accommodate us and a crowd, so long as it's outside of a building. Free for all! We have a donation box and we mention it before and after whatever performance we're doing, but anyone who wants to see us can do so for free. We believe art is for everyone, not just the people who can pay for it. We talk to folks after shows, get to know them as a person instead of someone in the audience, encourage them to chase their dreams and live honestly."

"It's why our troupe is called the Proselytizers."



Lily shoots a look at Hemlock. “No it isn’t, Coy. Lock’s just joking about us being preachy. Our troupe is nameless, as it should be. We’re people, not a brand.”

Undeterred, Oak plows on, her smile getting wider and wider, her excitement etched into every word. “We believe in making art for the sake of art. Don’t worry about it being ‘good’, don’t worry about what others will think of you, don’t even finish it if you can’t, just do your best and make it from the heart! And we put our whole hearts into each and every performance. Share your beauty with the world, without reservation! Everyone and everything in the world has beauty in them, and we want to see it all. Share what you can with others so they can be free of the stress of ‘need’. Find ways to thrive outside of a system that exploits people for profit, and teach that to others. When we’re ready to move on to the next town, we keep the money we need to scrape by and to get to the next town, ensure we have just enough for emergencies, and the rest, if any, we donate to folks that need it. Money is essentially burnable trash, and only has meaning to help others and survive in a society that requires you to have it. That’s our way of life.”

Oak’s excitement is infectious. Sequoia’s eyes are wide and she leans forward into every word, forgetting even the remaining food in front of her. “That... that sounds incredible. You really *must* be weirdos.”

Oak rubs the back of her neck and laughs. "I toldja. But we wouldn't have it any other way. We've never heard of being normal, not even living in the city. We've never had 'real' jobs."

Sequoia finishes off the last onion ring and pats her tummy. All the nervousness and worry seems to have been washed away with her hunger. "I know what you mean. I'm failing my classes for a buncha reasons, but in the end, I can't really picture myself holding down a job as a pact-bound demon. Or... well... any job in Hell. I learned the fiddle to work through my emotions and, well... It's really fun to play too. Being able to play music for others instead of just myself... make genuine connections with people... maybe a few pranks here and there... Bring a lil happiness to folks, y'know? That's what I want. That's what I argued with my teachers about!" She snickers to herself. "I'm kind of a rebellious little shit. I always said maybe if we didn't twist the words of summoners and just get back to harmless pranks, we'd be seen more positively and maybe even be allowed back up. In high school I was probably in detention more than class. I've been on academic probation since day one of college."

The other three all look at each other at the same time. They all nod, and Lily turns to Sequoia. "Hey Coy uhm... What are your plans? Where will you stay, what will you do? Try to find a way home?"

Sequoia vigorously shakes her head and waves her hands defensively in front of her. "No way! Like... pact-bound demons got it good compared to a lot of us, but... I've been curious about topside since I was just an imp. My creator has told me so many stories of topside from before and just after the Reveal that it's all I've wanted. I... hadn't really considered what I'd do when Hemlock brought me out of the catacombs. I was just so happy to be out. Do you think they're hiring here? And have a back room where they'll let me sleep?"

Lily crosses her arms and closes her eyes, raising her nose up to the sky. "No no, that won't do at all! You just got here, and you're already thinking about entering the meat grinder?"

Hemlock spears a huge chunk of steak with her fork. "Y'know... She did a real convincing job of making the guards think she was dead. Held her breath for like two minutes and made herself stink like a corpse to boot."

Lily thinks for a moment. "Do you know any jokes, Coy?"

"Uhm... do you know why I didn't order the liver?"

"Why?"

"Because it's offal."

Hemlock bonks her head on the table and pounds it with her fist, shaking with laughter. Oak gives out a belly

laugh at that. "That joke's so bad you literally slayed Hemlock!" She turns to Lily and makes her eyes real wide. "Lily, she seems really fun to talk to and be around. Plus what're we gonna do, give her some money and say best of luck? Have fun coping with an alien world?"

Lily crosses her arms and smiles. "Now how am I supposed to mount an argument when you gimme that look? Actually, I was about to suggest it myself. It's a great idea. What do you think, Hemlock?"

Hemlock lifts her head from the table and wipes away a tear, giving one last chuckle before regaining her composure. "I already decided before we even entered the tavern."

Oak's smile returns, her excitement creeping into her voice again. "That settles it. Coy, how would you like to join the troupe? You want to know what it's like up here, right? Well, you'll definitely see a lot of the continent that way. You'll also meet a lot of interesting and cool people, people who support independent artists like us. It's fun, but hard work, always different and always exciting, plus you get to wear costumes, paint, draw, play music... It's a safe place, too. Like Lily said earlier, we don't judge for who or what you are, only how you act. All we ask is that you give us the same courtesy, that you contribute and do your fair share of the work and performances, you put your whole heart into your performances, and that you're

cool with the money being pooled into one sum we all share. Whaddya say?”

Sequoia searches her brain for her thoughts. “You mean you'll let me tag along? And all I have to do is play the fiddle and tell stories and wear costumes and act and cast magic and do stunts?”

“Well, there's a lot more to it than that.” Lily plucks a french fry from Oak’s plate and chews on it while talking. “You'll probably also have to learn carpentry and a buncha other random skills. That's not even for being a Freelancer, there's a lot of skills like that that are necessary for our performances, like building the backdrops and breaking them down so we can reuse the parts. Performing also takes massive amounts of stamina, especially at the pace we get into sometimes. You're scrawny now, but in a few months you'll be all wiry like me probably. Especially if you keep eating like that. If our tips continue to plummet, you'll probably have to at least get the relic retrieval, farming, and carpentry licenses. We'd never ask you to get a monster extermination license if you're uncomfortable with that, and arbitration is rare and kinda stressful. Definitely something you need a delicate touch and a thick hide for. Once you're decent at that stuff, we'd have to get you registered with the Department of Information so you can get a Freelancer license. If you want to tag along, see how you feel about it, we understand. I want you to know, there is no pressure. You can come and go as

you want, we won't force you to do anything. If you can't handle life on the road, we get it, it's not as easy or romantic as most people think or we make it out to be. We only ask you to pitch in your fair share while you're with us." She leans forward and smiles warmly at Sequoia, tilting her head slightly. "But... We'd really like you to stay with us and be an equal partner. No one's above the others here, we all have a role and something valuable to contribute. I work the finances and set up gigs, Hemlock sets up and breaks everything down, Oak makes posters and hangs them up around town... I'm sure we'll find something for you where you can fit in."

Sequoia wilts slightly. "What if I'm no good? And like... you just met me, I'm a total stranger to all of you... why take me in? Why invite someone with no experience into something that means so much to you?"

Oak reaches across the table and puts her hand on Sequoia's and smiles. "Seems like you need help and direction. We've been talking about wanting another person to travel with, but haven't really found the right person til now. Win-win, right?"

Hemlock polishes off her steak and gives a short laugh. "I don't think Oak's warmed up to someone so fast in her whole life."

Oak rubs the back of her neck and laughs. "Pretty much! You kinda give me the same feeling Hemlock did

when she joined us. You just... you get it, y'know? Most folks, after the stuff we said, would just scoot away and look at us weird. You're sitting here saying how much you would love doing what we do, and we'd love having you with us. Don't worry about the other stuff. Talent, skill, and knowledge have very little to do with it. Can't get experience if you never try! The important thing is that you put your heart and soul into it. If you're sincere and genuine, people'll love you and have a lotta fun. And like Lily said, we won't force you and if you want to hop off, we'll make sure you get set up enough to make it on your own. C'mon, stop making excuses and say yes."

Sequoia's face lights up like the sun rising. She clasps her hands together and her eyes go as wide as she can make them. "Then... Yes! Enthusiastically, yes! Just promise me one thing."

Lily steals another fry off Oak's plate. "Well, that depends on the thing."

Sequoia flashes a sly grin. "We'll get to eat often, yes?"

"Haha, yeah, absolutely." Oak scoops up a fry from Lily's plate. "Sometimes our meals are leaner than others, but we rarely go hungry. Hurts the performances. Then it's settled. Welcome aboard, Coy!"

Sequoia practically leaps out of her seat and wraps her arms around Oak's neck, giving her a big hug. Oak wraps her arms around Sequoia's sides and squeezes.

Sequoia speaks just above a whisper, with a tear in her eye. “Thank you. You have no idea how happy this makes me.”

## Chapter 3

It's well into the night by the time the gals leave the tavern. The chill of the early spring air bites into them as they gather a short distance from the tavern. Oak zips up her hoodie and Hemlock tucks her coat close around her. Sequoia, for only wearing a tanktop, doesn't seem to notice. She stretches her arms above her and arches her back. “I wish I could fit more of that food inside me. That was amazing. Nothing like the scraps from the college's kitchen.”

Hemlock shakes her head. “I still can't believe you actually ate all of that.”

Oak rubs her hands together and puffs some warm breath on them. “It's a shame Harvey wouldn't let Tabby off and told us to order more or get out. How's he still the owner anyways?”

Hemlock buries her hands in her coat pockets. “Tabby told me he's vowed to never give up control while he still draws breath. Revenge for gals like us taking over the place, apparently. Whatever, it's the best place on the



continent and we get to have our space. I'm willing to compromise on him being a huge jerk for that.”

Lily rolls up her sleeve and checks her watch. “It's 'bout quarter til nine. Still pretty early yet. We got some time to walk off that food before we should head back to the van. Coy, did Lock show you any of the town?”

“No, we came right here from the college. I haven't even seen the town at all yet, just the alleyways and side streets between here and there.”

Lily nods. “I'm all for going to the beach. First night in town? Gotta get my feet wet. It's bad luck to break tradition.”

Sequoia puts her finger on her chin and thinks. “Why would you want wet feet?”

“I mean in the ocean, dork. The east side of town is a boardwalk with a pretty nice beach and the ocean.”

Sequoia's eyes grow big and she waves her arms. “You have ocean here?!”

“*The ocean.*” Hemlock turns and starts leading the other gals through the narrow alleys and side streets that lead away from the Boar. “And yep. That's what that salty smell in the air is. The tide should be nice and high right about now.”

Sequoia just has a shocked expression on her face. Oak laughs and walks beside Sequoia. "I'll take that as 'let's see who can get to the ocean first.'"

"Me!"

The gals spill out onto Feymist Ave, the main street leading through the center of town. They head east, gravitating towards the boardwalk. Along the way are tons of local shops, all closed down for the season. Shops advertising seashells and wood carvings, others selling custom printed t-shirts, another kites and toys. Interspersed between all of them are restaurants of every type. Sushi, more taverns, sandwiches, pizza... some aglow with activity, others darkened with signs saying things like "Thanks for the wonderful season! See you in May!" The gals walk in a clustered knot, all of them close to the others. Lily hangs back with Sequoia and turns to her. "So Coy... You mentioned your uhm... creator Mahog a bit. What're they like?"

"They're a crow."

"A crow? Like... a demon dude with a crow's head?"

"No no. Literally a crow."

"Oh. That's... not at all what I expected. I figured they looked kinda like you."

Oak hangs back and walks on the other side of Sequoia. "I've read that they were a general who rebelled

against the goddess Cecilia when she revealed herself to the world, but back before the Reveal they caused the ruin of monarchies, brought together feuding neighbors, and played pranks that really messed with people's form."

"I dunno about all that, but it does sound like something they'd do. They also despise dignity, that's important to them. They demanded their cult on Earth shed all dignities such as clothing, names, grooming, and gender, and to shun the virtue of modesty. They're always telling me 'Dignity's a weapon of delusion devised by clever animals who desire to wield power they never had against those who live as they should.' Mahog... in the shadow of your wings, the nations of the world wither like weeds! Your tuneless song shatters the glass edifice of honor! Your beak pierces the minds of man, pulling with it the seed given to them in the beginning! Your great and terrible gaze as you fly o'er the land exposes the lie of industry! Mahog!! The Repulsive!!!"

Everyone just stares at Sequoia with wide eyes. Oak manages to whisper out "Awesome."

"Er, sorry. Got carried away. They're just... so cool y'know?"

Lily rubs the back of her neck. "Ah... yeah? So wait, does that mean we should use 'they/their' with you?"

Sequoia gives a short laugh. "Nah, I'm a girl, but only because I choose to be. Like I said, I'm rebellious. I'm not

sure I ever saw Mahog so mad before as when I settled on a form that wasn't bland and generic. To them, it was bad enough I was even given a name and they'd only use it when they were upset at me. 'Sequoia Virens Petticorn! You wipe those features off your form this instant! No child of mine is going to have distinction!' I refused and was grounded for a week for it. They have... had I guess? the power to revoke my form but never did. I think secretly, they were proud of me for sticking to my disobedience."

"I... see."

Sequoia stuffs her hands in her pockets and hunches forward. "So uhm, you said you're here for a few weeks, right? Are you doing a show each night?"

Lily raises a finger. "We're here for a few weeks. You're one of us now, y'know, unless Hemlock's snoring drives you so crazy you run off in the night. Or if you ever decide you want to go off on your own, we wouldn't hold it against you. Do what you want in life, so long as it makes you happy and doesn't hurt others."

Sequoia smiles softly and looks down at the sidewalk. "Uhm, I don't think that's going to happen anytime soon."

Hemlock scoffs. "I'll have you know my snoring's a defense mechanism. Helps to ward off predators. It's a miracle of evolution, and you should respect it."

Lily rolls her eyes. "And no, not every night. We're doing a show every other night, so we can have some energy and momentum when we hit the road. Feymist is sorta like... home to us, more than anywhere else, even me and Oak's hometown. We like to take the time to relax here. Tomorrow's an off night, so we can relax and do whatever."

"What're... we... putting on the night after that?"

"The Thief and the Throne, Lichtenstein's classic tale of love, paranoia, and betrayal. Do you know it?"

"Nope."

Oak nods. "It's maybe a bit stuffy for our time, but we have fun with it. I play the lead, Hibiscus, a girl drawn into a life of crime by circumstance. She takes a shine to it, and becomes so bold as to make her next target the king's vault."

Hemlock hangs back until all four of them are walking side by side, taking up the entirety of the sidewalk. "I play King Rafflesia and the mercenary Wolfred. Rafflesia believes the people of the land plot against him, and so becomes a tyrant, fulfilling his own paranoid delusions. Wolfred is a mercenary hired to catch the thief Hibiscus and root out any traitors to the throne."

Lily closes her eyes and smiles wide, putting her hand to her chest. "And I play Princess Lilac, the daughter of the

king, who warns her father of his folly and plots to usurp the throne and quell the people's rebellion. We're hanging up fliers for the show tomorrow when we come back into town to visit some friends.”

“Come back into town?”

Oak shrugs her shoulders and looks a little sheepish. “Our van broke down at the edge of the forest west of town. Part of the money we got for, uhm, your bounty is going towards parts.”

“What’s a van?”

Sequoia’s question is met with a prolonged period of silence from the others. Lily giggles mischievously to herself. Hemlock looks up at the stars and then back down to Sequoia. “It’s a mac-”

Lily holds up a finger and wags it. “Don’t spoil this for me, Lock.”

“Yes ma’am.”

Sequoia looks lost for a moment. “Uhm?”

Lily just grins at Sequoia. “You’ll find out, in due time.”

Oak turns to Sequoia and tilts her head. “What is the most recent topside history from your classes? If you haven't heard of a van and the Loser Board, that means you're at least one hundred and fifty years out of date.”

“The Reveal is the last of our topsider history. We’ve been in the dark since.”

Hemlock recoils. “S-seriously?! All them thousands of years and nothing?”

Oak’s ears twitch. “If you don't mind me asking... If your books on history and culture are millennia out of date, how do you know the parlance of our time?”

Sequoia puts her hands behind her head and leans as she walks. “That’s a good question. I’m not entirely sure? Mahog is the one that teaches language courses in grade school. This is just how they taught us to talk.”

Lily rolls her eyes. “Here it comes.”

“Mahog claims to have invented slang, so that people could offend the sensibilities of the elite. Maybe they found a way to spread culture, if not keep up on it? That just goes to show you their power and glory. Able to pierce the veil between our dimensions, influencing culture, even from exile!”

Hemlock laughs. “I guess that saves us a lot of time teaching you to fit in.”

Sequoia turns to Oak. “When you think of how a demon would speak when summoned, what do you imagine?”

Oak makes her fingers into mock claws and she hunches over. “Foolish mortal. For what boon hast thou wagered thine very soul by conjuring me forth?”

Sequoia tilts her head back in laughter. “Hey, that’s pretty good! During tests and when summoned, that’s how we talk. That whole thee and thou stuff. Topsiders have certain expectations of what a demon is like that we must meet, so we can't use our normal way of talking. Helps catch the summoner off-guard. Their hubris and so-called ‘arcane knowledge’ are seemingly justified, causing them to make mistakes. If we talked like we are now, they would've figured out they summoned some punk with no power rather than a mighty demon. I guess they'd be right in my case?”

Lily’s expression goes flat. “I think you’re just messing with us.”

“Hehe. Maybe someday you’ll find out.”

“Ah...”

“Jokes?”

Hemlock looks down at Sequoia. “So you haven't heard of the Coalition and Arclight yet, have you? Nothing in those books from the school’s library?”

“Nope. Are they important?”

“Maybe tomorrow we should stop by the town library.”



“That sounds like it could be fun. ... Hey Lily, mind if I ask an awkward question?”

“Sure, I guess.”

“I get how you got Coy from Sequoia, and Lock from Hemlock... But how do you get Lily from Linden?”

Lily’s face brightens and her smile widens. “Oh! That's not an awkward question. In fact, I'm really proud of that one.”

Oak just grins. “Now you’ve done it.”

Lily tosses her arm around Sequoia’s shoulders and faces her. “My parents named me after the linden tree, but linden is just the colloquial term! That is, what regular folk call a widely diverse genus of trees in the Tilioideaen subfamily of the Malvaceaen family of trees. With me?”

Sequoia’s eyes dart back and forth. “Barely. So there’s a type of tree everyone calls ‘linden’?”

“Yep! I bet you're thinking, ‘But Lily, how do you get linden from Tilioideae?’”

“I am?”

“You are. The answer is, you don't! It comes from the shape and color of certain species of Tilia, which is similar to an unrelated fruit called a lime! It would take far too long to go into the etymology maze to get from lime to linden, but to make it short, our language evolved from

many other languages over centuries of time. Lime used to be called lind, or the feminine form linde. Hence, linden! I guess my parents thought that because dad's hair is blonde and mom's is blue like mine, when I grew hair it'd be green?"

"Uh."

An object in motion continues to be in motion until a force acts against it. This goes for Lily, too. "Getting back to the matter at hand, all species in the genus Tilioideae start with the word 'Tilia', itself a nickname. The small leaf linden tree, for example, is *Tilia cordata*, because its leaves have a stem or spine going through the center, *cordata* itself getting its name from the phylum of animals with spines, *cordate*."

"Erm."

Hemlock drops her hand heavily on Lily's head. "It's best to just nod and smile. She'll get tired eventually."

Lily deflects the hand with a quick swipe. "Rude! I'm simply helping Coy understand how things up here work. Can you imagine? Going around in a scary new world without a proper education on the plant and animal kingdom? No, you can't, because it's unimaginably horrible! Knowing about our culture is ok for dealing with people, I guess, but people and their culture are only the smallest fraction of life and knowledge on this planet!"

“It won’t be long now.”

Lily lulls her head dismissively. “Aaaaanyways, so Tilia cordata, Tilia tomentosa... the point is, linden trees start with tilia. Take the ‘L’ from ‘Linden’, the ‘ili’ from ‘Tilia’, put ‘em together and you get...”

“Lili?”

“Exactly! Of course, that's not actually a thing, so I use a y instead of an ‘i’ at the end, because lily is a type of small but beautiful flower. Like me! Also! The lily has become a symbol of women who love other women, also like me. In fact, a whole genre of art based on girls' love is literally called ‘lily’! I'm an icon, it's true. See? Isn't that so cool? WAY more clever and interesting than merely ‘Linden’. Do you feel any smarter?”

Sequoia rubs the back of her neck. “Something smarts alright. I think I realize now how you feel when I talk about Mahog and Hell.”

Lily grins a self-satisfied grin. “Exactly.”

Sequoia leans forward and looks towards Oak. “So what kind of instrument do you play?”

Oak leans forward to talk to Sequoia. “Guitar is what I’m best at, but I can pretty much play anything we’ve got in the van. Fiddle, sax, trumpet, clarinet, analogue synth, and the like.”

“What kinda music do you play? Tell me what it’s like to use magic up here. And about these ritual things, I’m super anxious to hear how you all figured that out. Oh! And what ruins are like!”

“Well...”

Lily slips her arm off Sequoia’s shoulder, who doesn’t seem to notice. Lily grabs Hemlock’s elbow and gives a slight nod. Both slow their pace and let the other two walk ahead a good distance. Oak and Sequoia gravitate towards each other, not noticing the others have fallen behind, and talk animatedly with each other. Sequoia asks question after question, Oak barely able to keep up with Sequoia’s curiosity. They hit the boards and turn right, not seeming to notice they ran out of road. The gals pass by closed down arcades, an amusement park, places that sell beach sundries that have long since closed for the season, and the like. Lily crosses her arms and smiles. “Look at those two go. I don't think I've ever seen Oak warm up to someone so much in a week, let alone two hours. Then again, I don't think we've ever met someone she has more in common with than Coy.”

Hemlock laughs. “Ain’t that the truth.”

Lily closes her eyes and shakes her head. “I've waited a long, long time to see her open up so easily, Hemlock. I'm so proud of her.”

Hemlock smiles warmly, wrapping her arm around Lily's shoulders and pulling her close. "No kidding. Five years ago this would've been unthinkable, even if it was someone like Sequoia. She's come a long way. It all turned out alright in the end. Seeing her like that makes me happier than I could ever imagine. Makes that day five years ago and everything that followed more than worth it. If I could do it all over again, I wouldn't change a thing."

Lily wraps her arm around Hemlock's waist and looks up at her. "It means a lot to me to hear you say that, Hemlock. Thank you." Lily laughs. "You've probably changed even more than she has. Pun intended."

Hemlock snorts a short laugh and grins down at Lily. "Yeah well. The lightning and the mud and all that. I don't miss the old days at all. Doesn't even seem like it was me, just some asshole still trying to get the wild outta her. Can't believe you didn't toss me out on my ass in the first year."

Lily leans into Hemlock. "We would've given you the boot but your muscles were too damn useful! You're still too hard on yourself, tho. You're a good person, Hemlock, you should just accept that. Someday I'll get through that thick skull."

"That'd be the day. You could throw a bullet at my head and it'd probably just ricochet off. Gonna need Arclight lasers to pierce this dome."

Both of them chuckle at that and watch the other two girls converse excitedly with one another. Nothing is said between Lily and Hemlock for a long time. Lily looks up at Hemlock with a wicked smile plastered across her face. "I bet as soon as we get on the beach, they run straight into the ocean."

Hemlock tilts her head back and forth, as if letting the idea slosh over her brain. "Hey now, that's an interesting bet. Coy for sure will, but Oak? Making it easy for me, Lil. ...What're the stakes?"

"If the two of them jump in the sea, when we go to Turk and Delbruk's tomorrow, you gotta try on a dress. AND! Turk gets to pick it out and take a photo."

Hemlock tilts her head, pondering it for a moment. "No wonder you're making the bet so one-sided." She rolls it around her head some more. "...Agreed. And if they don't, we work me into the bullet catching trick in some way from now on instead of having me answer the Loser Board."

"Those are stakes I can live with. Agreed." and they shake hands.

Another lull in the conversation between those two as they continue to watch Oak and Sequoia form a bond. Hemlock clears her throat and raises her voice. "D'ya think Oak's gonna tell Coy?"

Sequoia and Oak hang back to let the other two catch up. Sequoia turns to the others and puts a finger to her chin. "Tell me what?"

"Not to go running into the ocean."

Sequoia and Lily both yell "Hey!" in the same instant, Sequoia putting her hands on her hips and Lily scowling up at Hemlock. "That's cheating!"

"You're gonna show me this ocean and not let me go in it? I've *dreamed* about this!"

Hemlock shakes her head. "*The* ocean. And between the cold night, the temperature of the water, and evaporation, it'll lower your body temp and make you sick. Sorry kiddo, you'll have to settle for getting your feet wet tonight."

Sequoia smiles smugly and crosses her arms, walking backwards. "Oh, is that all? Don't worry about that."

"Eh?"

"Yeah! Some instant cleaning, a blast of heat... It's not a problem, I got this."

Lily crosses her arms and grins up at Hemlock. "Yeah, you got this. I believe in you, Coy."

"Look! There it is! Race ya, Oak!" and Sequoia bolts towards the edge of the boardwalk and leaps off, jumping about four feet down into the sand.

Oak unzips her hoodie and grins madly. "You're on!" and gives chase.

"W-wait! Oak! Think about this!"

"Gotta get over my fear of water sooner or later!" Her voice fades as she runs towards the ocean. "It's only a quick dip anyways!"

Lily doubles over laughing and slaps Hemlock's back hard. "Outwitted Lock! Outwitted by far! And I didn't even have to do anything! Cheaters never prosper, y'know."

Hemlock hangs her head. "Rub it in, why don'tcha. Fair's fair, well played Lily. It'll be worth it just to see the look on Turk's face."

Lily reaches up and playfully punches Hemlock on the shoulder. "Aww, you didn't have to take it so well. Tell you what, we'll still find something for you to do during the bullet catching act. Hell, Lock, I didn't know that was bothering you. All you had to do was ask."

"Hey yeah? Thanks, Lil. Guess we better go dig a fire pit." Lily and Hemlock walk further down the boardwalk to some steps leading down, gathering dry beach grass and reeds as they trace their way back to where the other two leapt off the boards. They look out towards the ocean, and notice a trail of both of their clothing strewn about the beach.

Lily's eyes go wide. "Now *that* I didn't expect."



Hemlock shakes her head. “No kidding. She *has* come a long way. That'll help keep 'em from getting sick, at least. Probably why she's in her birthday suit. Metaphorically, of course.”

“Good point. Still surprising. How'd she even talk Oak into doing that?” Lily rolls up her sleeves. “Do you mind digging the pit yourself? I can't miss this.”

“Depriving you of this is tempting, but I'm in a charitable mood tonight. G'wan.” Hemlock takes Lily's sticks and grass and dumps them on the sand. She gets on her knees and starts clawing up clumps of sand with her bare hands. Lily takes off her boots, ties the laces together, and hangs them around her neck before rolling up her pant legs and following the trail of clothing. It takes a moment to spot them amongst the waves, but the tide washes Oak and Sequoia back onto the beach, both curled into a ball as the waves throw them down, landing on their backs. The wash flows over Lily's feet as she sinks them deep into the mud.

Lily tsks. “Look what came in with the tide.”

If Oak wasn't frozen solid, she'd look nervous. “H-h-hi buh-buh-buh-beautiful. Uhm. I j-j-just fuh-fuh-figured it'd b-b-be easier to w-w-warm up wuh-with d-d-dry cuh-cuh-clothes.”

Sequoia is nearly hysterical with laughter. “Again!”

Lily turns her head back towards Hemlock and shouts “Whaddya think, Lock? Should I toss ‘em back?”

Hemlock peeks her head out of the pit she’s dug and cups her hands over her mouth. “They’re too shrimpy to keep! Back in the drink with ‘em!”

“Well, you heard the lady. Back in you go!” and Lily hefts Oak over her shoulder and grabs her ankles.

“Nuh-nooo nonono! Haha puh-put me down Lil! Stuh-stop!”

Lily works her feet out of the mud, spins on her heels, holding tight onto Oak’s ankles, and uses the momentum to fling her back into the ocean. She hefts Sequoia over her shoulders, ready to do the same, and receives no protest, just wild laughter. Sequoia passes Oak being washed back in with the tide and soon rolls back onto the beach herself, her eyes shut tight and chest heaving with laughter.

Lily shakes her head and tsks again. “You two are hopeless. Lock's getting a fire going, head on up and get warm. I'm gonna stand here and let the waves wash over my feet a bit.”

Sequoia stands up and shakes herself, and Oak gets up, hunching up around herself and rubbing her hands vigorously over her arms. Sequoia touches Oak and the water sloughs off both of them like it was made of cloth.

The air around them starts getting wavy, like the space above blacktop under the hot summer sun, and Oak's shivering slows. They run up to the fire Hemlock's started and huddle in front of it, putting their hands to the fire, which inexplicably gets larger. Hemlock takes off her coat and tosses it over the two of them, who gather close to each other under it, clutching it to them. "Mahog but that was everything I imagined and more! I can't wait til it gets warm so we can do this all day!"

Hemlock laughs and shakes her head. "Kinda early for a beach episode. We still got a few more months before it's warm enough for that."

"That felt great. Except for losing all feeling in my body. It felt good to get back in the water. What was I even afraid of? This rocks." Oak turns to Sequoia. "Coy, isn't it uncomfortable to keep your tail in your jeans like that? I know it was for me until I put tail holes in my bottoms."

Hemlock puts her hand on her chin and strokes it. "Was there a tail? Don't seem to recall that."

"Yep!" And from behind her Sequoia brings forward a tail with a spaded point the same color as the rest of her. She waves it at Hemlock like a cobra being charmed before pulling it back under the coat. "In anatomy class, we learned that topsiders don't have tails, so I figured it'd be easier to fit in if I hid it. It doesn't really bother me,

plenty of room in those jeans. Oak's got a tail anyways tho, so I was worried about nothing.”

Oak shakes her head. “Yeah but that's because I'm weird. Almost no one else does.”

Sequoia tilts her head. “Don't your people?”

“They don't have them either. Like I said, I'm weird. My parents are just regular humans.” She leans against Sequoia under the coat. “If it makes you uncomfortable, I'll modify your jeans to accommodate it. The crowds we mingle with will either not notice or think it's cool as all get out.”

Sequoia bats Oak's tail with her own. “Thanks Oak. I appreciate it, altho I only got the one pair of clothes anyways. Should be pretty easy.”

“Our friends Turk and Delbruk run a thrift clothing shop on Knoll Ave. We're seeing them tomorrow and Turk will flip at having the chance to dress you up like a doll. We'll get you set up with some clothes and I can put tail holes in your bottoms for you.”

“Haha, that's kinda weird! But maybe fun also. Thanks Oak, I appreciate it.” Sequoia furrows her brow and closely examines the coat she's huddled underneath. “...What's with this coat, anyways? It makes me feel all... strange. Not bad, actually pretty good, but just... weird. I wasn't sure back in the catacombs, but now I'm positive it's this coat.”

Hemlock looks up at the stars for a moment and lets her breath out slowly. "Hey Oak. Why don'tcha go get the two of yours clothes and go fetch Lily. You two are dry enough."

Oak gets a worried look on her face. "Uhm, sure Hemlock, be right back." And Oak gets up and walks over to her clothes and starts putting them back on, tail twitching with anxiety, before gathering Sequoia's clothes.

"Hey Sequoia." Hemlock's gaze hardens, her usual aloofness absent from her face. "Take that coat off, put it back on, and immediately take it off as quickly and dramatically as you can."

Sequoia eyes Hemlock warily. "Huh? Your tone and your face..."

"Don't worry about it. You're safe. Indulge me."

Sequoia hesitates. "Uhm... Ok... You're not some kind of pervert, are you?"

"Nope. Trust me."

"...I trust you." Sequoia shrugs off the coat, waits a few seconds, then puts it back on her, then immediately stands up and whips it off of her, casting it out towards Hemlock over the fire. From a distance, Lily whoops at the sight. Hemlock reaches up and snatches her coat out of the air, then tosses it back to Sequoia.

Hemlock's face relaxes and she lets her breath out all at once. "Hey, that was pretty good. You sure you haven't had acting classes? You can put it back on now if you want. At least that proves you aren't a monster. Not that I thought you were, but now there's no doubt about it."

Sequoia pulls the coat tight over her. "Huh? Does that coat affect monsters or something?"

Hemlock crosses her arms and nods. "Sure does. Keeps 'em from moving for a few moments. It's the patches. Some of them are intended to keep a monster from moving so it's easier to put out of its misery quickly and with as little pain as possible."

Sequoia scoots backwards a bit and nervously eyes Hemlock. "Is that what you were gonna do if this ratty old coat thought I *was* a monster?"

She shakes her head. "Nope. I would've told you it's just really heavy, and if the other two ever asked I would've told them you took it off no problem. Keeps them from being complicit. Back awhile ago, some asshole bred monsters for people and other monsters to fight in an arena for sport. Since they shut that place down, keeping monsters is highly illegal. At least they would've been safe, and probably able to take you somewhere."

Sequoia scoots back towards the fire and eases the tension out of her body and face. She levels her gaze at Hemlock over the fire. "But not you."

“Nope. They deserve the world, not me.”

Lily and Oak walk up to the fire, Hemlock scooting over so they can sit next to each other. Oak tosses Sequoia her clothes and leans against Lily, holding her hand. Sequoia brings the clothes under the coat, and starts to redress. Lily grins at Sequoia over the fire. “That was some showmanship, Coy. A few hours practicing with a cape and you'll be top of the game in no time. Maybe we can dress Hemlock up as a bull and charge at you. Whatcha talking about?”

“My coat. She said it makes her feel weird, but she was able to take it off no prob. When you made yourself smell for those guards, was it as strong as you went for?”

Fully dressed, Sequoia drapes the coat over her and clutches the collar to her neck. “Yep, no problems there. It's just... it's a real comfy coat, and warm, but it gives me that same feeling of... solidness that I got when I first came here. Not heavy, but... more... real? It's sorta hard to explain.”

Hemlock raises an eyebrow. “That's surprising. I don't know what that could be. No rune etched into those patches should have any bearing on anything that's not a monster or magic in some way.”

“Rune? So that's why they glowed earlier. Maybe because I'm a demon?” She turns to Oak. “You made these, right? Is that why?”

Oak shakes her head. "Wasn't me, those are all Hemlock originals. If she doesn't know, I have no clue. I've studied and experimented with those patterns but I can't understand what makes them work or what they actually *do*. By all rights, they shouldn't *do* anything. It's ah... really irritating that they do actually work?"

Sequoia's head darts between the two. "Wait, Hemlock can use magic too?"

Hemlock crosses her arms and shakes her head. "Nope."

Oak crosses her arms and stares down Hemlock as she nods. "Yep."

Lily buries her face in her hands and shakes her whole body. "Oh no. You have no idea what you just asked, Coy."

Hemlock stares right back at Oak. "It ain't magic. It's an expression of the traditions and history of the old gods, passed down to me from my father. By honoring and believing in the old gods with all my being, they give meaning to the patterns, making them work. Magic's basically a scientific discipline."

Sequoia's eyes grow wide. "Old gods? You mean... the nameless ones of the orcs?"

Hemlock peels her gaze away from Oak and smiles at Sequoia. "Hey, you know about that? That'll make this easier to explain. Before he came to be our village's



blacksmith, my father, Wolan, was the captain of a hunting party in an orc tribe out in the northeast. That tribe passed down the wisdom, traditions, and belief in the old gods for millennia before even the Reveal. When he adopted me, he instilled the belief deep in my heart, taught me the traditions of his tribe, and through that belief, the old gods guide my hand when I etch the runes into things I want to use to ward off magic and monsters. I like putting 'em on coat patches because they look crusty as hell. The babes love 'em.”

Oak rolls her eyes and huffs. “Please. They have underlying rules you just don't know and I haven't figured out yet. It's no different from drawing sigils or burning components. The fact they're so weak that you have to use a bunch of 'em to have any effect proves that. You're just doing them wrong.”

Hemlock pulls herself to her full sitting height. “Then how come you haven't figured 'em out yet? How come each one looks completely different? If they're knowledge, why haven't we come across literally any literature about them or even the old gods? It's because they're given power because they *aren't* knowledge, they're a belief. I only have a lot of 'em because they fade in the wash, breaking the lines. Then they're just cool decorations.”

Oak emphasizes her words by waving her hands. “That doesn't mean the knowledge doesn't exist somewhere! Most knowledge becomes belief over

centuries of progress and forgetfulness. Scientific advancements become superstitions, historical records become legends. You get predictable, comparatively weak results by following your own rules. I'm not disputing there were powerful, nearly god-like beings before the Reveal, but the fact that those runes don't block out all magic completely or hold a monster indefinitely proves that it's because they weren't literally gods and there's totally forgotten, yet still theoretically extant, books or relics or *something* from back before the Reveal that indicate the rule behind the patterns and what they do. If they were actual, literal, real gods, how could they lose power! How could they fade away! That doesn't make sense dude. It's knowledge that has simply become belief and superstition due to the passage of time and the abandonment of old religions after the goddess revealed herself to the world.”

“We went all winter without this, too...” Lily moans from underneath her hands.

Sequoia scratches the back of her head. “Uhm.”

Oak eases her defensive posture focused on Hemlock and returns to her usual slouch before turning her head to Sequoia. “Sorry Coy. You probably are kinda lost. Hemlock and I were just having a... *discussion*... that we often have about the nature of the goddess and magic up here. I take it you don't really know much about that stuff.”

Sequoia gazes into the fire. "It's not that I'm lost. I know a bit about magic, but it's all based around a summoner performing a ritual to summon and bind a demon with a pact. I know that just after the Reveal, during the war, my people left behind a buncha knowledge and relics and such when we were banished."

"Want a quick crash course?"

"Sure, I'd like to know how topsiders think of magic these days. The fire feels nice and I'm not all that tired after being turned into a coysicle. Popsequoia?"

Oak laughs brightly at that. "Popsequoia is definitely better. So basically, magic is like a recipe for a cake. You have a bunch of ingredients and directions on how to mix them together properly and how to cook it, and when you do it right, you get a yummy cake. Cake's a good analogy here because if you don't follow the recipe exactly, everything won't mix together right and it won't come out right. Perhaps still edible, but not a cake. But! You *can* add flavor that doesn't interfere with the chemical interaction of the ingredients. This will change the flavor of the cake, but it's still a cake. Magic's the same way. You can't use just some random thing to be consumed as a component in a spell. Like... a cloud of darkness, you would use squid ink and hold it in your hands in an exact way, say an exact phrase, and move your hands out, throwing the ink in an exact way. But you can add green food coloring to the ink to make it slightly greenish darkness. Or you can mix in a

pinch of pepper powder to have the cloud sting. You could substitute finely ground coal dust, but it dissipates way faster. With cake it's chemical interactions, with magic it's arcane interactions: the point is, if you substitute an ingredient, it must jive with the rest. Magic is following a recipe that is exact, but allows for experimentation, to get an exact and predictable result. Well, most magic. We already told you about reality altering rituals.”

Hemlock leans forward and puts a hand on her knee to prop herself up. “That's my whole damn point. You say magic is knowledge, that it's a recipe, and you're right. With a lot, lot, *lot* of practice, and a better brain, I could do what you do. That proves that I'm right about the runes given to us by the old gods. I don't follow any rules or recipe, I just put my marker on cloth and listen. Then it's done. But that's the thing about magic too, it's actually a belief, a very powerful belief, because the whole damn world *knows* that the goddess is real and made the world. We aren't *allowed* to not know that.”

Sequoia pales and stutters a bit before managing to spit out “W-what do you mean, not allowed?”

Hemlock tosses some more sticks in the fire. “Is there something you have never seen, have no proof of, yet *know* it to be true? Not *believe* it to be true, but *know*. It's not a simple matter of being told it's true, you gotta know it, deep in your bones and brain.”

Sequoia's finger goes to her chin and she examines the stars. "I guess... the closest thing I can think of is that the... Business District... of Hell is where the souls of sinners are punished for their wickedness forever. Like I said, I'm forbidden from going there, even if I wanted to, which I don't, yet I know that must be true."

"Sounds pretty much the same." Hemlock levels her gaze at Sequoia, a stern look on her face. "Everyone that walks this Earth on two legs knows that the goddess Cecilia is real and made everything over, upon, and under the Earth. But that's the thing isn't it? That's *all we know* about the Reveal. Everything else is knowledge written down in books and scrolls and such. We *believe* that these things happened and we *believe* these things have power because of the highly ritualized nature of them. They're relics from one of the most important events in this planet's history, and tell you exactly what they do and how to do them, so it must be true right? Think about it. If everyone believes the same thing, then that's consensus reality. There's no such thing as objective reality, only what the majority believe. If there was objective reality, we wouldn't have things like schizophrenia and everyone would agree on everything. So if 99.99% of people believe something's true, it becomes true because of their perception. Belief literally shapes reality. So since literally everyone knows about the goddess, you've got the whole damn planet believing that these things have power, so they do. That incredibly massive and powerful belief is

what gives them power and makes them work. That's why my runes can't ward off all magic, because it's all just traditions and beliefs held by an extremely small number of people. Back before the Reveal, they were powerful enough to ward away anything.”

Shock is written plainly on Sequoia’s face. Oak doesn’t seem to notice, mocking a sheepish expression at Hemlock. “I guess that's one thing we agree on. Your stuff is more like superstition than knowledge. Even if it totally is knowledge that you just don't know about.”

“I don’t have to know. Because I believe.”

“-because I believe.” Lily mimes at the same time as Hemlock says it. “I swear Coy, they have this argument every season and it's the same every time.”

Hemlock plows forward, ignoring Lily’s dismay. “It's my firm belief, in the face of knowledge, that the goddess was an extremely powerful reality altering ritualist that rewrote reality to make it so she created everything so's to unite a widely disparate belief system across the globe into one monotheistic knowledge. Phew. Whatta mouthful. Just because I know about the goddess doesn't mean I can't believe something utterly contrary to that. Oak can never learn to make these runes because she refuses to believe that the old gods are literally gods, with voices and force and have been with us since we first crawled outta the sea. When Cecilia retconned reality,

people stopped believing in them, and their power faded, until the tribes entrusted to keep the history and traditions became the only ones who actually still believe. Gods operate on belief, it's what makes them gods. You won't find this stuff written down anywhere because if we did write it down, it'd all fall apart. It'd become 'knowledge', and would cease to work. Also Oak ain't anyone's son, and can never be, so it's a moot point"

Sequoia puts her finger on her chin and rolls her eyes up, trying to pull the right thing to say out of her brain. All she manages is "Wait, what?"

"Belief is very powerful, but the old gods demanded that it be ritualized as well. If you were to just have a buncha stories and a belief system, someone's gonna write 'em down at some point, and when you write stuff down, you can't help but add your own words and perspective, meaning it'd be open to interpretation, destroying the belief. So they demanded that their history, traditions, and the belief behind them be passed down from father to son, and it always has been. And because we're told that disobeying the traditions will break the belief, we damn well believe it to be true, so we abide by their rituals and traditions and it works. That's the power of belief. Oak? Even if she did believe, and I were to do something creepy and gross like adopt her, she could never be my son, only my daughter, so I couldn't pass it

down to her. Ugh, I feel sick talking 'bout theoretically adopting her.”

Sequoia plunges into her mind once again, desperate to pull out what she’s thinking. “Uhm.”

Hemlock crosses her arms and closes her eyes, slight annoyance creeping onto her face. “I know what you're thinking. Who says a gal can't be someone's son? Some geezers a couple'a centuries ago deciding who gets lumped into what group, as if the groups exist at all? Pfft. My tribe's traditions predate those assholes by millennia. Being adopted and a gal's got nothing to do with me being Wolan's son or the clothes I wear or how I act. I'm proud to bear the family name Wolanson, and wouldn't give it up for the world. I can wear ‘men's’ clothes, play men on the stage, carouse with tarts and tomcat around, start bar fights, talk gruff and be a shameless flirt. Society can't handle that, they can dangle. It’s different for Oak because of how she perceives herself and the relationships she builds with others.”

Sequoia sputters for a moment as she moves her hands aimlessly in front of her. “Uhm I didn't mean to cause offense, I was just thinking of something Mahog told me that you reminded me of and uhm, like that stuff is fine, I get it?”

“Ah, it’s forgotten.” and Hemlock waves it off into the ether. “No need to get all flustered by it. Sorry I came



across so aggressive 'bout it. At least now I know how to tease you. Teasing Lily's losing its savor."

Lily waves her hand in front of her nose as if warding off a stink. "Don't listen to her, Coy. Hemlock's a big plush teddy bear, all roar with no bite. She acts all tough and butch but you put your head on those puppies when she's lying down and watch her get all soft on ya." Lily turns to Hemlock and gets a devilish grin on her face. "You're out like a light, and she'll feel too bad about disturbing you and just snuggle up with ya. Works every time."

Hemlock averts her eyes, looking out to the ocean. "W-whatever. Can't help it you two keep doing weird shit. Ain't like I enjoy it or nothin'!" She turns to Sequoia and smiles. "Anyways. Thanks for stopping our debate dead, I was getting sick of it."

Oak laughs. "It's much appreciated, Coy."

"Happy to be of service." Sequoia reaches into the depths of her mind and finally finds purchase. "Uhm. Are the three of you... heretics?" A pall falls over the other three. Sequoia disarms the question with a giggle. "Obviously I don't mind if you are, but... The way the three of you talk, it definitely sounds like you're not buying into the whole Cecilia stuff."

Lily grabs Oak's sides and starts tickling. "Hemlock and Oak *definitely* are. Back in the day, they would've

been burnt at the stake for sure. Cook 'em up real good yummy yum!"

Oak squeals and balls up. "Nooooo haha nono stop stop! I can't breathe!"

Lily lets go of her gal and smiles her mischievous smile. "Me? I would've simply been 'reformed' through torture. Ah, but how could I go on without the love of my life and my best friend? I couldn't bear to be in this world without them! I would've blasphemed so hard, they'd have to redefine the term."

Sequoia laughs. "The three of you are about the sweetest."

Lily tosses some sticks in the fire and gazes into it. "No one really cares about heretical stuff anymore. Well, legally anyway. That stopped being a thing around the mechanical revolution. There's still a lot of real religious folks that get offended by talking about Cecilia in any tone but solemn reverence, but we don't deal with people like that much anyways. The way I see it, the whole goddess stuff is real fishy. This world, hell this continent alone, is full of extremely different people with wildly varying ideas of how they fit into the world. People are practically defined by the disagreements we have with each other. For fuck's sake, people can't even agree on the color of the sky. That's the point. Everything is an opinion, but the *only* thing *absolutely everyone* agrees on is that the goddess

Cecilia made the world and such. Even *Hemlock*, who literally believes that the goddess was just a powerful magic user, *knows* that.” She looks up at Sequoia and shrugs. “Isn't that a bit funny? Sounds pretty insecure to me. Why doesn't everyone stop and go ‘hey wait a minute...’? We've mentioned it to friends before, but they simply say ‘ah, but that proves her divinity, doesn't it?’ I don't buy that crap for a second. The whole thing stinks.”

Sequoia bunches her knees up to her chin and wraps her arms around them, lost in thought.

Lily crosses her arms in front of her and shuts her eyes, her smile matching the warmth and inviting nature of the bonfire. “But y'know what? It doesn't matter at all. Conspiracy, no conspiracy, real, fake... None of that actually makes any difference. I believe that you should live your life in whatever way makes you happy, so long as you do as little harm to others as you can. You can't live without causing a little pain to others, but you can do everything you can to mitigate it. Help others however, whenever you can. Understand and develop empathy for all people, even those with nothing but hate in their hearts. The fire of hate is just an expression of frustration with your lot in life, stoked by elitists who use people as pawns in their unending quest for even more power. Let go of such hatred, all it does is lead to unfulfillment and misery. Shun the lie of private property and embrace openness and sharing with others. Shed yourself of the addiction to

wealth and live simply. All people are as a river, and each person is a drop in the river, indistinguishable from the next. If you live true to yourself, wherever you end up after you die, if you end up anywhere at all, is where you'll be happy. It doesn't matter if the goddess is real or not, uncovering a theoretical conspiracy helps absolutely no one. What matters is you're alive and there's a world of beauty all around you. You can't let that slip past you, not for a moment."

Sequoia buries her face in her knees and whispers to herself. "(...It can't be a coincidence, meeting them. There's... there's even a bonfire here...)"

Lily nervously rubs the back of her neck. "Haha, sorry for saying such embarrassing stuff. We don't usually get all preachy like that, just when we're getting to know someone, promise."

Sequoia unfurls, stretching for a moment before folding her legs up and putting her elbows on her knees. "It's totally fine. Say what's on your mind, I want that. Genuine connections and conversations with interesting people. I certainly won't hold back. Uhm, you said the three of you are storytellers, right? You reminded me of a story that relates to all this. Wanna hear it?"

Everyone leans in closer and looks at Sequoia. Lily smiles and props her head up with her balled up hands. "Yeah, of course. We love hearing others' stories."

Sequoia leans forward, reaching into the fire with both hands. She scoops a bit of the flame into her hands as if it were made out of ice cream. A ball of flame hovers over her hands and illuminates her face as she brings it close to her. "It's a story my creator told me. If it sounds a bit stiff, I apologize, it's just... I wanna tell it like they told me. They told me that because it's a story about us and not Cecilia, even tho it kinda is, it deserves some... reverence. The three of you are likely the first topsiders to hear this since 'topside' was even a thing. It may even add context to your debate." The ball of fire shifts and forms into a tiny, winged demon.

"Long before what is now known as the Reveal, there was once a race of mischievous sprites. Born from the energetic void of a lower dimension, theirs was the power to shape reality however they saw fit. Through this gift, they brought forth from the void matter, so that they may play with one another. Time slipped away, and the sprites' culture advanced to the point where they were no longer entertained by themselves." The fire splits in two and forms two demons that poke at each other and shrug.

"Brilliant and powerful, their Boss discovered the existence of other realms, other life, new possibilities. Using the gift that was their nature, the sprites pushed past the membrane separating the void from the material, arriving in their new playground. Being the tricksters they were, they used their power over reality to play pranks on

the natives of this world. The pranks, to them, were harmless fun, meant only to embarrass the natives for a laugh.” The fire joins into a ball, then forms into a silhouette of a person, who walks in place. A lick of flame peels off and forms a banana peel under the form’s foot, which then slips and falls. Another wisp of flame flickers off and forms a demon, who points at the person and laughs.

“For millennia before millennia had meaning, the sprites and the people of their new home lived... maybe not peacefully, but certainly without any overt hostility between the two. The sprites were seen as they were, and the native people of this plane built customs and superstitions around them, and all was good, until the day all on the material world heard a voice coming from every direction at once.” The fire twists, molds, and shapes itself into a beautiful woman’s face, with long, flowing hair that seems to be caught in a strong breeze.

“This voice belonged to a being who called herself ‘the goddess Cecilia’, and claimed to have created the very world we all shared and all over, under, and upon it. No one had heard of her before, but then no one had heard such a voice before either. When her gaze fell upon the sprites, she said ‘I didn't make these assholes. What the fuck are you doing, shaping reality like clay, that's my jam, not yours. Cut that shit out and stop spoiling my perfect world by acting like a buncha lil shitheads or else.’”

The other three fall over themselves laughing, and the fire shifts into a cockeyed generic demon face. “‘Oh yeah?’ said the sprites. ‘Or else what?’ for the sprites were proud, and unafraid of the pretender. And with but a thought, Cecilia severed the connection the sprites had with their home, evaporating their power.” The face of the demon splits into two and falls to the side, flowing around Sequoia’s hands until it forms a ball hovering over them again.

“This was unbearable to the sprites who were now labeled demons by the deceiver, whose power was as much a part of them as their senses. Unable to cope with their loss, the demons allied themselves with those that had become heretics for not believing the voice in the sky. The first was the human tribe, who believed themselves to be the supreme life on Earth. Together, they invented a system of logic they could turn to force and harness against Cecilia, known as ‘magic’, for human logic was as alien to Cecilia as she was to the world.” And the flame carves away until it displays a generic person’s face with a pentagram floating behind their head, like a halo in old religious paintings.

“And they allied themselves with the orc tribe, who were angered by the voice's rejection of their gods. They gave to the demons protective runes that would shield them from the being's gaze, affording them the opportunity to use the weapon they developed with man

to end the madness in the sky above them.” The flame shifts slightly, forming an orc’s head with one of Hemlock’s patches behind its head.

“But the demons underestimated the cruel Cecilia. When she could not see the demons, she inspired the humans to bind and control the demons, knowing their greed and lust for power would soothe their scorched egos and expose her enemy. The human tribe created the pact-summoning ritual from the very knowledge they developed with their former allies, forgetting the true nature of demons.” The fire snaps into the form of a demon with a puddle of flame underneath it, and chains of fire shoot out of the puddle and wrap around the demon, pulling it into the flame puddle, which Sequoia shifts between her hands like water.

“And for daring to defy her, the monstrosity known as Cecilia struck the memory of the gods before her from the minds of all but the orcs, crushing their power while allowing them to remember what they had lost. The demons, clever and mischievous, reminded the humans they were once tricksters, and turned the human's new power over demons against them, twisting everything they demanded of the demons into horror.” A person rises from the puddle of fire, only to burst into a small explosion, the fire pulling back in on itself and forming a skull.



“And to the orcs, who remained their allies, the demons gave them the rituals and traditions to keep their gods alive through the passage of time. The delusional Cecilia, angered by the demons' resilience, filled every mind on the Earth with the knowledge that she was the creator of all that exists, sparing only the demons from her taint, for Cecilia's power could not extend to the minds of demons. But the only ones more stubborn than the demons were their friends, the orcs. Even in the onslaught the desperate Cecilia wrought upon their minds, the orcs clung to their beliefs, wisely following the demons' instructions. Through their traditions, they hid the last ember of their gods, preserving them for all time.” The flame splits into the shape of several improvised weapons; pitchforks, torches, pickaxes, and the like. They march in place, as if carried by a mob.

“But none were like the orcs, who still saw the sprites as they were. The natives of the world, bitter over the pranks played against them since the dawn of consciousness, turned against the demons, who they declared anathema to the being they came to know and worship, for they were the only ones who did not know the liar Cecilia. The demons, proud and defiant, created objects imbued with the power and logic they built with man called relics, and waged war against the people of the world.” The fire flows into a solid ball, which then melts away, leaving behind the shape of a book in the fire.

“But the demons, reduced in power and few in number, had no hope against the allied forces of all but one tribe on Earth. As the demons were routed, they performed one last desperate act of trickery. They sent their emissary, Mahog the Pacifier, to negotiate a truce with the voice in the sky, for theirs was the power to unite enemies.” The fire forms a small whirlwind in Sequoia’s hands, and dissolves into a crow flying in place.

“As Mahog flew to the highest point they could reach, the remaining demons placed their relics in strongholds, then filled the strongholds with traps and powerful guardians that could withstand the passage of time. Using the last connection they had to the logic called magic, they set upon these strongholds an enchantment to entice the people of the world, while shielding it from their enemy's touch. Cecilia, distracted by the honeyed caws of Mahog, did not notice the demons creating temptation for the people of the world that scorned them. Once the task was complete, Mahog informed Cecilia that she had been deceived.” The crow lands on Sequoia’s hand, pecks, then laughs while fluttering its fiery wings.

“The aberration known as Cecilia was furious at her inability to comprehend the demon ward. Taunting Cecilia with her constant inability to overcome us, the demon Mahog proposed a compromise: if Cecilia would restore the connection between the demons and their home plane, they would return to the void from which they

came, never to return, and would leave Cecilia to lord over her 'perfect world'. The false goddess agreed, and the instant the demons' gift was restored to them, they found themselves once again in formless void." The crow then tilts upside down and bobs in place, its wings fluttering uselessly.

"Satisfied with the truce, the demons began reforming their previous civilization. It wasn't long before the demons discovered the true depth of Cecilia's depravity. She had restored their power and returned them to their home, but time had barely begun to reassert itself when they received something unexpected: the soul of the human tribe's chief, who broke their alliance so many years ago. Unsure what to do with the worst guy and unable to destroy him, the demons sequestered the soul within a cage he could not escape." The fire flares brightly, and recedes, showing a man trapped inside a cage, shaking the bars.

"This did not end with him. One by one, the souls of the world they were exiled from arrived in the demons' home. The demons came to realize their enemy had at last bested them. Through the void, they heard the hated Cecilia's final word to the demons: 'Punishment!' The structures the demons built from the energy of their own home began to twist and reshape themselves in the manner of Cecilia. They formed what are now the Administrative, Business, Residential, Educational, and

Social districts of what the demons could no longer call home and could only call Hell. Like the relics they left in the strongholds, at the heart of the gnarled nexus of their ruined home, they found a book detailing what are now the rules and culture of Hell.” The fire bunches together and forms into a demon, whose wings fall off and horns grow longer. It falls to Sequoia’s hands, kneels down, and heaves as if weeping.

“As the centuries slipped into millennia and the millennia gave way to timelessness, the demon nature became as corrupted as their home. No longer the proud and mischievous tricksters they once were, they now cower in their ruined home, only able to follow the instructions they were given, in the hopes that obedience can be reshaped into salvation.” The flame forms into a ball once more. Sequoia raises it to her lips and snuffs it out with a quick, sharp blow. “So ends the history of my people.”

The other three’s jaws are hanging loose and free, their eyes bulging. “Or at least, that’s what my creator told me. Uhm. Thanks for listening to my story?”

Everyone sits stunned for a moment longer before breaking into applause, Oak pinching her fingers in front of her lips and whistling wildly, Hemlock stomping her foot in the sand, Lily pumping her fist. Hemlock trips over her words for a moment before catching them. “But why hasn't Cecilia shown herself since the Reveal?”

Lily practically interrupts Hemlock with her own question. “Why do the demons follow her instructions when they could just go somewhere else?”

Oak immediately follows Lily’s question, leaning so far forward she’s nearly in the fire itself. “How did they create magic when they had no power left?”

Sequoia raises her hands in defense and leans back a bit. “Hey hey, like I said, I wasn't there, my creator was. I'm simply telling their story like they told me.” She plasters on a wicked smile. “Maybe one day you can ask them yourself.”

“That was... absolutely the best damn storytelling I've ever heard.” Hemlock shakes her head and closes her eyes. “That way you manipulated the fire for each scene... absolutely incredible. The only thing missing was a score.”

Lily leans back and props herself up with her arms. “To the surface, the demons sent young Sequoia, for hers was the gift of expertly weaving a totally kick ass story.”

“Aaaaa, tell it again!” Oak clutches her hands to her chest.

Sequoia laughs freely. “Seriously? The three of you really are heretics. I'm glad I cast my lot with three of the strangest topsiders there could be.” She bunches her knees up to her chin again. “I... believed this story before tonight, but now I know it to be true, because of the three

of you. Your debate is all the proof I need. And... If topsiders are realizing the deception of Cecilia, then maybe the knowledge will evaporate too... and then maybe... we can be as we were.”

Oak scoots over to Sequoia and wraps an arm around her shoulders. “I really want that to happen for you all but... Well, we're not very good examples of topsiders, y'know? We're weirdos and outcasts and losers.”

Hemlock gets up and dusts the sand from her bottom and hands. “And dry and warm enough to march our sorry hides back to the van. We stay in front of this fire any longer, we'll be telling stories til our ears and jaws fall off.”

“Aw. Ok.” Sequoia waves her hand dismissively at the bonfire and it instantly goes out. Not even so much as smoke rises from its ashes. “I guess we have our whole lives to make new stories anyways. Besides, I'm dying to know what a van is.”

Lily just stares at the remains of the bonfire for a moment. She pokes the ash with the last of the remaining sticks and touches the end, feeling its coldness. “Huh. Guess that saves me from having to kick sand over it. We gotta leave through the west gate. Should be pretty much a straight shot from Feymist Ave. Let's mosey.” They walk up the length of the beach, at the edge of the ocean, making the time to observe and talk about the various

critters they see that Sequoia asks about on the way home.

## Chapter 4

The walk to the van is long. The gals pass through town, talking to each other about whatever thing passes through their heads. Mostly, they talk about their shows, with Sequoia asking questions about what they entail, how long they've been doing it, where they have been, and things of that nature. Oak, for her part, tries to ask Sequoia about her time in Hell and about her life up to this point, but each time Sequoia deflects and returns the topic back to performing. After an hour of walking, they come across a campsite on the edge of a nearby forest. The remains of a campfire sits in front of several logs and stumps, obviously selected for their function as makeshift seats. Looming behind this is a long, boxy vehicle. It's all one unit, as in no separate cab and hitch. It does, however, look like it's been cobbled together from parts of lesser, now defunct vehicles. It's a matte black finish, and it's rusting in parts on the bottom. There's a few dents along the skirting. It's tall, too. If Lily got atop Hemlock's shoulders, she could probably climb up. Lily waves with a flourish at it, as if pulling away a curtain. "Ta-daaaaa! Behold, me and Oak's masterpiece!"

Sequoia tries her best to hide her disappointment.  
“Uhm. It's very... it has... a lot of character?”

Lily puts her hands on her hips and looks extremely pleased with herself. “You bet it does! Betchyer wondering how it moves without horses.”

“I assume magic?”

“No!”

“Yes.” Oak interjects.

Lily rolls her eyes. “Ok yes. Sort of. Indirectly! The actual principles of how it works are deeply grounded in science and the physics of machines! I picked junk parts from my dad's garage my whole childhood until I finally was able to complete it. Well, he helped me along a little. A bit. A lot. But everything besides the parts is all me. A totally custom built and designed from the top down mobile home! Even designed the engine myself. That may not seem very impressive, but I assure you, it's a miracle of genius and determination!”

Oak laughs. “And stubbornness. And it really is impressive, trust me.”

Lily crosses her arms and closes her eyes, sticking her nose slightly in the air. “And plain ol' bullheaded stubbornness! Not many people can say they completed a custom vehicle before they were even fifteen. Or at all! You'll see similar, newer looking, and usually smaller



vehicles traveling around named 'cars', and this uses similar concepts.”

Oak walks over to the van and leans against it. She folds her arms and faces Sequoia. “It's real complicated, but in short, two hundred years ago a city by the name of Arclight became the most technologically advanced place on Earth essentially overnight. The city became a country, and they proliferated technology down to the rest of the continent, kicking off what's known as the mechanical revolution. At first it seemed like a dream come true, and revolutionized society. Countries abandoned the feudal model they were in for centuries, and life was getting easier for people. Arclight taught us about mechanical interactions, physics vastly more advanced than our understanding, and with it, cars. And that machinery runs on a type of arcane energy we call fuel. They taught us that there's ambient energy in all things that can be condensed without destroying the land. At first, they seemed to tell the truth. It wasn't until we were well into the mechanical revolution that we noticed wherever we were using Arclight machinery, monsters started cropping up, becoming bolder and stronger than we'd ever known.”

Lily huffs and puts her hands on her hips. “Those damned Arclighters gave us their experimental and discarded technology deemed too dangerous to use! The condensers actually peel away tiny, minuscule amounts of reality, causing backlash that was creating monsters! They

didn't count on the rest of the Windswept continent being far more clever than them. We discovered a way to convert trash into fuel safely and efficiently! It still creates a waste byproduct, as all things must. Fire creates smoke which clogs up the air, farming causes runoff we have to keep out of the water table, and animals... well. No need to say, right?"

Oak makes a disgusted face. "Right."

"But not all waste is harmful! Trees take sunlight and water and convert them to sugar, which is then consumed as energy to help the tree thrive, and its 'waste byproduct' is oxygen! The very thing that helps sustain life. Our ingenuity in solving the fuel crisis is much the same. We take trash, convert it to fuel using a machine we devised on our own cleverly called a 'fuel conversion machine', and the thaumaturgical waste, or byproduct, is a phosphorus and nitrate rich fertilizer used in farming. Those farms then create plants, which create oxygen, and those plants are consumed as food by organisms, which produce trash, sustaining the cycle! No need to dump our trash in valuable land needed for wildlife and forest! No need to tear away at the fabric of reality so we can make life easier with machines! We didn't kill two birds with one stone, we saved all the birds with one bag of trash! Metaphorically, anyways. Fascinating, isn't it?"

Sequoia rubs the back of her neck and nods. "Honestly, yeah, that's sorta brilliant. I didn't really expect

topsiders to develop something similar to us. We don't lack for energy to create stuff, but when we don't need matter anymore we return it to the nothingness. Reusing matter and finding value in waste unites us. Your way of doing things seems... surprisingly altruistic and noble.”

Hemlock shakes her head and leans on the van next to Oak. “It ain't all that altruistic. The Coalition, that's the government system around here, allows a few select companies to keep the secret on how to convert trash into fuel and they won't share with the rest of us. Hell, we wouldn't even need to answer the Loser Board if it weren't for the cost of fuel. The way it works is, we provide the trash, they run it through their machines, they keep the fuel, we get a tax break, and they keep the fertilizer too. They then *sell* fuel to consumers and the fertilizer to farmers. Goddamn greedy is what it is. There'd be no such thing as 'need' if it weren't for people who think money is more valuable than peace and life. It'd benefit everyone to just share it. The only reason governments and companies exist is to keep everyone needing things, so they can supply them, ensuring their position of authority.”

Lily rubs her knuckles on her breastplate as if they were an apple and blows on them, her eyes shut with pride. “And so, now that you know what a van is and we've bored you to tears with our rambling, if you'll step through this door, dear Sequoia, we welcome you home!” And she walks over and holds the door open for Sequoia.

Oak turns to Hemlock and mimics Lily's devilish grin as Sequoia enters the van. "How long do you think it'll be til she notices?"

Hemlock rolls the question around in her head. "I doubt she even will. Start to, maybe, but catch on completely? No way."

"Oh? Wanna bet on it?"

Hemlock slumps. "No thanks. Already lost one of those tonight. Do you and Lily just have a racket going against me?"

Oak flutters her eyelashes in mock innocence. "I have no idea what you're talking about, dearest Hemlock."

Hemlock slumps further down the van and hangs her head. "Kinda figured."

Sequoia walks into the van and looks around. Right by the door on the left is a large art desk, stained with ink and paint from heavy use, with a roll of paper stretched out across it. The desk has cubbies for just about every brush and pencil and pen imaginable. Just across from the entrance is another, shut door, with a first aid kit bolted onto it. Further to the left are two mattresses on the floor, one with the blankets balled up in the center and the other with them carelessly flung over the side, loose clothing covering the area around the bed, and a dresser. Beyond that are two high backed chairs,

presumably the driver and passenger seats. Across from the art desk is a chest labeled “Tools” and has its own little cubbies for many different kinds of fasteners. Sequoia whips her head to the right, and sees the inside of basically every theater’s storage room. Chests brimming with costumes, instruments of all different sorts, masks and other clothes hanging on bars and on the walls, a few seltzer bottles, boxes labeled “set pieces”, and the like. Immediately to the right of the entrance is a worn out old sofa facing a TV, a VCR, some tapes, and a small collection of books in the cabinet they sit on. A fridge and cabinets are tucked inbetween the living area and the storage area.

“Uh?” Sequoia runs out of the van, then along the length of it. She dashes back inside, and walks the length of the van. She heads back to the doorway, quickly leaning in and out of the van, comparing the outside and inside. “You... really aren't normal people, are you?”

Oak laughs. “We keep telling you! Took you this long to accept we're weirdos?”

Sequoia shakes her head. “No no, not like that. The inside of the van is massive! But outside... it's like... not even as long as the four of us put end to end. That shouldn't be possible for normal people.”

“Now it's my turn to brag. Yep, we did say it was Lily and my masterpiece, right? Lily built it, and I... expanded it. On the inside. I specialize in extradimensional magic.

Emphasis on the 'extra!'" It's a good thing Oak laughs at her own jokes, or else they'd float into the ether, unappreciated. "Don't look close at the seams of the walls. If you tilt your head just right, you'll get really dizzy. That's because I spent two years studying and practicing, then another full year carefully and meticulously etching sigils into the seams, expanding the inside until we had enough room. Or y'know. Before I pushed it too far and snapped the van in half."

Hemlock knocks on the side of the van. "It really is best to not look at them too carefully. Hits harder than a keg of beer without any of the fun."

Oak hangs her head and shakes it sadly. "It's a work of art and we're the only ones who get to appreciate it. And the crampedness before that..."

Sequoia shakes her head more vigorously. "No no, you misunderstand my point. Sure, this is beyond the skill for most people, but with enough time and dedication it's learnable. The knowledge itself shouldn't be accessible to normal people. This is like... the knowledge we used to build the mazes of the strongholds that stored our relics. That's not something topsiders should have access to."

Oak jabs Hemlock under the ribs with her elbow. "Haha she did notice. Good call not taking the bet."

Hemlock crosses her arms. "I suddenly have a vision of a future where you three troll me nonstop every day."

Oak swishes her tail in front of her and she starts anxiously playing with the tip. “Remember how we said one of the licenses available to Freelancers was relic hunting?”

“Sure sure.”

Oak pinches her fingers and grimaces. “So there may be a few times where we were sent into demonic ruins to recover texts and relics that I kiiiiiiinda maybe don'ttellanyone made elaborate, functional copies and kept those.” She raises her hands defensively. “Almost never for their power, I swear! It's illegal but I just wanted them for their knowledge! It's not like I'm selling them on the black market! I never kept anything dangerous either, so I think it's ok. Whenever we answer one of those jobs, it's for a museum who doesn't even know what they're asking for. Just whatever relics and artifacts found in such and such ruin. Most relic retrieval jobs are given to the Crossguard Guild, but museums get special permission to post it directly to the Loser Board. If you hire the Crossguards, they have the authority to destroy objects they deem too dangerous to allow 'civilians' to possess. You'll occasionally see something specific on the Loser Board, and that's when you know it's the real dangerous stuff you should stay away from.”

“Crossguards? Like on a sword?”

Oak pales slightly and nods. "That's where they get their name, yeah, but for tonight let's just say that I hope you never have to learn about them. As for the ruins, most folks are scared to enter those old ruins, and for good cause. You're probably familiar with why, seeing as some of them used to be demon strongholds. There's hardly even any Freelancers that have the license for relic retrieval. Not that there's much call for it either, it's pretty rare especially these days to see a posting. I figure, hey, why not make copies of some select texts for people who appreciate them for their knowledge, trade freely amongst other practitioners, and don't abuse them for personal gain. Uhm. 99.98% of the time."

Sequoia laughs. "That would explain it, then. You folks enjoy being the antithesis of normalcy, don't you?"

Hemlock folds her arms across her chest. "I revel in it."

Oak gives a short laugh. "Yeah, it's really fun."

Lily leads everyone into the van and talks over her shoulder. "And it's not just stuff like that, but our lifestyle as well." She sits on her mattress and leans against the wall of the van. "We're all a family, but not a traditional one. Sometimes a family is three, now four, gals traveling around in a van spreading love and entertainment, sharing all we can with the folks we meet. Being part of normal society is so boring and unfulfilling. Can you picture us living in a city, holding down steady jobs in a



building for forty hours a week? No, you can't, because it's unimaginable. We wouldn't make it to our lunch breaks.”

Sequoia sits down on the floor and bunches up her knees. “I think I'm gonna like it here a whole lot. You kinda remind me of something Mahog told me back when I was in junior high. When you mentioned phosphorus and nitrate and farming, it reminded me of it. Would you like to hear a quick story? It's a good one, and way way way shorter than the one earlier. And way less wordy and stiff. Promise.”

Hemlock sits on her bed and leans against the wall, stuffing her hands in her coat pockets. “Of course. We wanna hear about your life y'know? You'll be sharing it with us on the road after all, and we'll be sharing ours, so let's hear it.”

“It's not dramatic or important or anything, it's just a funny story. Most things that happen in Hell are just funny stories. This was in my Advanced Knowledge and Practical Application class. The teacher just got done explaining about agriculture and how to use it to twist the desires of the summoner. During famines, having a successful harvest is a major reason to summon a pact-bound demon. If a farmer asks for a successful harvest, one thing you could do is ensure they have a successful harvest of highly poisonous crops that appear to be normal food. If they ask for fertile soil, you could give them soil that grows literally anything from literally any seed, including animals.

If you ask for a successful harvest of food that won't make you sick that was grown with phosphorus and nitrate rich soil, you could inspire the governor to seize their land and push them off the property. And so on, into even grosser territory than that. It's why we study topsider culture and life so thoroughly, even going so far as to have university. We gotta come up with all that in like thirty seconds!"

Everyone stares holes into Sequoia.

"Hey, don't give me that look, I haven't told you the rest. I told you this is a good story, right? So, I was in class one day..."

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Senior year classroom, Advanced Knowledge and Practical Application class, Hell. A nearly featureless demon stands at a lecture podium, facing a small classroom of maybe fifteen other demons. All of them sit upright, attention rapt, and are like the teacher: generic and bland looking, but with clothes on. Well, almost all of them. Sequoia is flopped over her desk, her hand limply hanging off the edge. She looks even younger than she does now. Impossibly, something the teacher says manages to catch Sequoia's distant attention. "And as you can see, the multitude of ways you can punish a summoner is limited only by your knowledge and imagination. This example is limited only to the soil and farm itself. It doesn't even consider catastrophes such as

locusts devouring crops, or a freak solar flare scorching the land with radiation. Ideally, you'll discover a way that leaves the summoner alive long enough to realize their hubris and fall into despair, before their eventual demise. A skilled demon can keep the summoner alive long enough to die of natural causes, tho the horror wrought upon them has shortened that life drastically.”

Without sitting up, Sequoia lazily raises her hand and waves it. “Teach! Teach! I gotta question!”

“Yes, Ms. Petticorn?”

“Why?”

“I beg your pardon? Why what?”

“I mean... Why do that at all? It's not like a poor farmer is trying to gain unnatural power, or kill someone, or whatever. They're simply trying to survive and feed their family and community. Why punish that so severely? Can't we just like... tell them 'hey bud, you seem like a nice guy, here's a freebie: get a bunch of small fish and eggs and stuff and mulch them with wet wood chips and spread it around, making sure to water each day'?”

The teacher huffs and stamps their feet, placing their hands on their hips. “We are not in the business of giving out ‘freebies’, Ms. Petticorn.”

Sequoia manages to peel herself off of the desk and sit up. All the other demons face her. “Ok, so no free

farming advice, but why not just let them off the hook? Or help them? Their request seems benign enough.”

The teacher pushes their glasses up their nose and sticks their nose up. “Well, if you were awake, you would've learned last week that topsiders are lazy and selfish creatures. If we were to help them, they would learn nothing. They would rely on us solely, and use us as slaves to satisfy their laziness. Their society would collapse, because progress would be abandoned in favor of having someone else do everything for them, and reality itself would be thrown into chaos. They need this punishment to remind them that they have a duty to progress society and rely on their own skills and knowledge.”

Sequoia places her finger on her chin and scans her brain. Old habit. “Isn't that what ahem” and she points upwards, “said about us? Why we were exiled in the first place? We were called lazy and cruel creatures that subverted reality for our own needs. And here we are, millennia later, creating ephemeral matter from literally nothing through sheer will alone. What gives us the right to punish topsiders for doing what we do? Plus, it's not even possible for these miracles to happen without us. Why is pact-summoning even a thing? Why tempt them with power they couldn't ever achieve only to pull the rug from under them and say ‘gotcha!’? That's not a prank, that's just mean. I know this is Hell and all, but-”

“Ms. Petticorn!”

Sequoia leans forward, gripping the edges of her desk. This is possibly the most attentive she's been in her whole academic life. "Look, I *sorta* get wanting to punish perverted criminals but farmers who go so far as to sacrifice their souls for food to feed their people is an act of selfless desperation that should be rewarded!"

The teacher whips off their glasses, squeezes their eyes tight, and points out the door. "OUT! Get out of my classroom and go to the principal this instant! In all my millennia..."

-----

Oak lifts her head off Lily's shoulder and leans forward. "...Wow. I'm surprised you could even do that?"

Sequoia shrugs. "Yeah, I'm kind of weird for a demon? I don't get on well with the other demons. Everyone in all my classes are super stoked to get their diploma so they can go on to have successful and creative careers tormenting topsiders. Me? I empathize. Your society has progressed a lot, sure, but my points still stand. Pact-summoning isn't even so common a thing that it revolutionizes society or has vast implications! And like... the teachers deny Mahog's story, but it's true! Pact-summoning was a way to subvert us, why embrace it? Take your 'fuel conversion machine'. You essentially magic away your trash and only reap benefits, and society stands, and you seem to have done that without our help.

You aren't summoning us by the droves so you're not looking for demon slaves. When's the last time you even heard of a pact-summoning?"

Oak tosses the question around in her head. "Not in a history book? ...Never?"

Sequoia raises her hands. "See? I knew the classes were pointless, like they're just giving us something to do so we can buy into the whole topsider and Cecilian idea of what a demon is. It's gross. Anyways, to... uhm... 'get back on the tracks'?, once I got to the principal's office and the teacher came by, they were so pissed that they summoned my creator."

-----

Principal's Office, Hell. Sequoia slouches in a seat in front of the principal, her hands shoved in her pockets, her head hung. From a chair next to her, a flash of smoke appears and from it appears a huge black crow. Well, huge for crows. Its red eyes dart across the room to the principal, the teacher, and rests on Sequoia. "Craw!"

The principal leans forward and folds their hands together atop a thick, open file on their desk. "These are grave offenses, Your Vileness. Disrupting a classroom. Questioning the unfathomable logic of Hell. Empathy for topsiders! Condemning demonhood! Skipping class! SLEEPING during class! A general disregard and disinterest for the purpose for which she was created! I

don't mean to question Your Vileness, but perhaps there's a reason you were not permitted to create a child until recently.”

“Craw!” Mahog starts pecking at feathers under their wing, pulling several out and spitting them on the floor in front of the principal’s desk.

The teacher stands in front of the door, their arms folded, their nose still hung in the air. “In all my millennia, I've never once sent a student to the principal. Never once had such a disruptive and disrespectful student!”

“Crawhawhaw!” and the bird clacks their beak at them.

The principal shakes their head. “Do you realize the sort of trouble she’s in?”

“Craw!”

The teacher steps forward and looks down at the ancient crow. “Do you know what I think?”

“Craw!”

“That she should be reassigned to the corps!”

The principal leans back in their chair slightly, but keeps their hands folded. “At this point, unless she changes her... deviant attitude, it may be our only option.”

“Craw. ... Craw!” and Mahog hops on the desk and pecks at specks of dust on it. “Craw.”

The teacher rolls their eyes and puts a hand on their hip. “Oh please, do you think we could trust you to bring this before The Boss?”

“Crawhahwhaw!”

“Obviously, she has picked up bad habits from home. I shall have to request an audience with The Boss myself.”

“Craw!”

The teacher thinks on this, and seems to toss it around their brain a bit, letting it chew on this information. “Very well. Then we shall leave this in your terrifying and hideous wings. Fly forth, our message dripping from your foul beak.”

The principal unfolds their hands and closes the thick file they had open on their desk. “You are dismissed Your Vileness. Sequoia, you will be suspended for a week. We shall leave the rest of your punishment to your great and horrifying creator.”

-----

Sequoia rubs the back of her neck. “Ok, so I may have embellished that last part a lil, but the point is, I was terrified. You have to understand, compared to some of the other courses, pact-bound demons have it real good.



We live in homes, we can create allowed books and music, we can learn an instrument, we have hangout spots, we're given a name and a topsider one at that, and we are forbidden from entering the... Business District... of Hell, sparing us its horrors. While not everyone does so, we're even permitted to choose a form! A pretty rare thing down there. Mahog being a general from back during the Reveal, I was scared The Administration was going to send me to the military, maybe even revoke my chosen form and shape me into something more... ideal. I was crying in my room when I heard some pecks at my door.”

-----

A plain looking room with a small vanity, a bookshelf, a fiddle leaning up against the wall, a writing desk and chair, and a modest but comfortable looking bed. Sequoia’s room as a teenager, Hell. Sequoia lies on her bed, face down in the pillows, crying softly into them. “Shave and a haircut” rasps against her door. Muffled into her pillow, Sequoia responds with “Two bits.” Mahog rises up from the floor, then flutters up to the bed.

“Craw?”

“It's not that... I can't help but firmly believe that I did the right thing. I don't regret what I said at all.” Sequoia rolls onto her back and sits up, eyes still wet. “What's wrong with everyone here! Can't they see they perpetuate the same folly that keeps us here? Why does everyone just

turn a deaf ear and a blind eye to that? What's wrong with me for being able to see what the others cannot!"

Mahog's head just tilts and darts like any bird's would. "Craw."

"You... You called me daughter? You accept me?"

"Craw."

Sequoia manages a weak smile. "Now it's not fun anymore."

The old crow cackles, throwing their head back and clacking their beak.

"I don't want to be reassigned to another division in Hell. I don't want to be in *this* division of Hell! I know how good I got it... I know I'm spoiled, and I appreciate being created for a purpose that allows me to live like this, it's just... I'm scared they'll send me to the corps. That I won't be able to be me anymore. But... I can't help but be disgusted of what I'm expected to do as a pact-bound demon too! I don't think I'm really cut out for any of this. Maybe you should just return me to the nothingness... Maybe then I can be reformed into something that can cope..."

Mahog flutters their wings and walks towards Sequoia, wings outstretched as they shake them. A few feathers fall loose. "Craw."

“But... if I wasn't created for a purpose then... why am I in these classes? Everyone in them-”

“Craw.”

“No, would I like to know something very important but not very comforting? Craw haw haw.”

“Crawhawhaw! Craw.”

“Sniff... what is it?”

The bird flutters up to Sequoia's shoulder and wraps a wing around her head, pulling her close to their body.

“Craw.” Sequoia lifts Mahog off of her shoulders and hugs them tight to her chest.

-----

Hemlock practically falls over to the side. “THAT'S a funny story?!”

Sequoia can only offer a shrug. “Maybe you had to be there? Mahog makes me laugh. They've got a great sense of humor and comedic timing, and know exactly how to irritate the shit out of people they dislike. They did end up telling The Boss about the teacher and principal's request that I be reassigned, but nothing ever came of it. In the end, maybe they remembered the old days, when they were a peacekeeper instead of a general, and made a convincing argument in my favor.”

“I can see the humor in it.” Oak waves her hand in front of her in the universal motion of so-so. “They seem like the type to have deceived your principal and teacher for summoning them, just because they thought it was funny. A demon general is summoned by a pact summoning teacher and principal and twists their careless request against them? Classic irony. Maybe Mahog told The Boss to reassign you up here?”

Sequoia lifts her head from her knees and stares wide at Oak.

“Haha... jokes?”

“It shouldn't be possible, but... It makes perfect sense outside of that. When I said they summoned Mahog, I did mean it literally. Not with a pact or anything but... Maybe... But none of us are permitted up here, not even The Boss. Not since we were exiled. And that story took place like three years ago... but...” and Sequoia buries her face in her knees again. “The most powerful irony burns slow... But... why wouldn't Mahog tell me...”

Lily kicks off her boots and tosses them to the side. “Maybe there's more going on behind the scenes than we can see. For one, it's kinda weird you ended up in the catacombs specifically. For another, your bounty shouldn't have been on the Loser Board. With how rich the college is and how long those catacombs have been sealed, and weird magic going on? That's definitely Crossguard

territory. Then again, maybe it's just some freak occurrence.”

“Maybe... Or maybe...” Sequoia unfurls and leans back on her hands, kicking her feet out. “The whole point of my story was, I get it. I lived true to myself by being an absolute pest to my teachers and professors, playing jokes on my fellow students who never appreciated it which made it all that much funnier, and now I'm up here, where I always wanted to be, and with people who seemingly already get me. And I'm into your whole deal. You live how you want, give of yourself to others, and defy the arbitrary and restrictive boundaries of societal expectations, and things work out for you. Birds of a feather and the like.”

Oak brushes back the flop of hair covering her left eye and tucks it behind her ear. She does have two eyes after all. “I think you make us out to be more noble than we actually are. We fuck up a whole bunch, and living how you want can be kinda selfish?”

Lily bops Oak on the head playfully and turns her attention to Sequoia. “Don't listen to her Coy. Nobody's perfect and we do vastly more for down and out folks than your average person. We've also defied some societal boundaries in pretty extreme ways, and came through the other side better for it. Stop being so modest and accept compliments, Oak.”

“I literally can't?”

Sequoia stretches out and flops down on the floor of the van, sprawling out. “Anyways, I'm feeling kinda overwhelmed right now and could use some sleep.” Without sitting up, she turns her head towards Hemlock. “I take it the bed with the duffel bag and clothes is yours?”

“Yep.”

“May I sleep on those clothes and duffel bag and wear your coat?”

Hemlock folds her arms on her chest and mocks annoyance. “Or you can sleep on a bed under blankets like a normal person.”

“Nah, that's fine. Gotta be better than the stone floor of the catacombs anyways.” Sequoia rolls her head lazily side to side. “Besides, looks like all the beds are spoken for.”

Lily puffs some hair out of her eyes in frustration. “You’re not sleeping on the goddamn floor, Coy.” Her expression turns warm and she smiles. “There's plenty of room in me and Oak’s bed. We don’t have much of a sense for modesty either, y’know. We have a couch that you can sprawl out on too, if you prefer. If you want privacy and personal space. It’ll only be temporary until we can build a bunk bed. Again, if you want privacy which is totally cool and understandable.”

Sequoia sits up and looks around the area and between the two beds. "Well, if you're that insistent, it looks like there's enough room in the middle."

Lily tilts her head. "For...?"

"I'm still kinda wound up from everything. It'll prolly help me sleep better, too. What're these things made out of?"

"You mean mattresses? Uhm... cloth for a cover, metal springs for support, and cotton for padding? I think?"

Sequoia nods to herself. "That's explicit enough. Got a spare blanket and pillow? And some raw metal, cotton, and plain cloth?"

Lily scratches her head. "We have a few extra blankets and a pillow or two? You're not making a lot of sense, Coy. We don't have the tools or skill to make a mattress at all, let alone one this late at night."

Sequoia just grins at Lily. "I'm being coy, get it? Seriously tho, do you have that stuff? I don't need a lot."

Oak scoots off the bed and heads to the supply area. "Yep, we got some cotton we use for fake snow. We should have a roll of cloth around here somewhere, and a steel ingot or two. We can get all that stuff for you."

Lily shouts after her. "Do you know what's going on?"

“Nope! But I’ll go along with it!” Oak digs through the supplies for a few minutes and drags back an ingot, a bag of cotton, and a bolt of canvas that she lays on the floor between the beds.

“Yeah, this should be plenty. Lily and Lock, hop off the beds for a sec.” Lily climbs atop the driver seat and flops herself over it. Hemlock leans up against the back of the passenger seat, and Oak sits on the console between them. “Uhm, so hey. If I pass out, don't freak out, ok? I'm only sleeping. I think I had enough food tho where I can stay awake for like... a minute.” She then just looks at the items on the floor, which begin to shake. The ingot peels into several strips, more than should be possible for such a small amount of metal, and coil into springs. The cotton stuffs itself between and around the springs, and the canvas envelopes all of it before sewing itself shut. The newly minted mattress falls to the floor with a soft thud, fitting perfectly between the other two. A popping noise is heard, and a patch of grass and flowers grows out of the ceiling above Lily. Sequoia flops over onto the mattress and curls up into a ball. “Hey that was an in... interest...in'... back...lash... You uhm (yawn) got them (yawn) blankets? Or I can just... coat... ZzZzZz” and Sequoia’s breathing becomes slow and steady, instantly fast asleep.

The other three’s eyes are ready to pop out of their heads. Lily sits upright atop the driver seat’s headrest and



manages to pick her jaw up off the floor. “Was that real? Did I just see what I thought I saw?”

Hemlock takes off her coat and drapes it over the sleeping Sequoia. “Either that or we’re all having the same hallucination.”

Oak stutters for a few moments. “I... I’m at a loss for words. She did that like it was nothing.” She leaps up and snatches a flower off the patch of grass on the ceiling. She sniffs it and gives it a slight nibble. “These... These are real too. How is that kind of backlash possible? It should've been enormous for what she just did. Utterly astonishing. I guess that means we don't have to worry about a real wild backlash again?”

Lily hangs her head and kicks her feet like a punished child. “Hey... That reminds me... We're taking her in for the right reasons, right?”

Hemlock turns to Lily. “How do you mean?”

“We jumped from just meeting someone to inviting her to live and travel with us in the span of like... not even five hours. We've met people in need before who could've used shelter and haven't done that.”

Oak puts her finger on her chin and rolls her eyes skyward, already picking up bad habits from their new friend. “Not since Hemlock, anyways. We've had folks stay with us while we're in town before, but never invited them

to live with us.” She looks down and scuffs her foot on the carpet. “But... It sounds kinda cold, but most of the folks we meet and talk to know how to survive in the world at least... and with the way we travel around, we'd be taking them out of support networks they've fought hard to form...”

Hemlock shrugs and sits down on her mattress. “You said it yourself, we help people with what we can, when we can, how we can. If we didn't take her in, she would be even worse off than when she was in the catacombs. I don't want to even think about what would happen if a Knight of Cecilia found a demon sleeping in a tent. Taking people away from the places they know and the people they rely on out of mere obligation is cruel. Taking her in is selfish, but for the right reasons. Remember our conversation earlier?”

“Which one?”

“One of the things me and Lily were talking about right before the beach was how quick you were to warm up to her. You two were talking about stuff like you'd known each other your whole lives.”

“Hey, is that so weird?”

“Yes.” chimes Lily and Hemlock in perfect unison. “For most people but especially you.” Hemlock puts her hand to her forehead and pretends to have the vapors. “Deprive you of forming solid, close bonds with a new friend?”

Perish the thought! Too horrible for contemplation.” Hemlock manages to draw a laugh out of Lily before she continues. “Yeah, we're doing this for the right reasons. She needs help, she won't get it anywhere else, and no one here can deny we enjoy her company. Look how long we jabbered at each other for. Nevermind Oak, when was the last time the three of us connected so quickly with someone?”

Lily jumps down and sits on her bed, across from Hemlock, looking over Sequoia's sleeping form. “Never. Even if it's right for us, is it right for her? All we've been talking about is if it's right for us. Is she only doing this because we're the first ones who accepted her? Who's to say there isn't someone in Feymist that would make her much happier? Or any town? What about love? She'll have a hard time finding someone, if she even wants that, with the way we live. Unless she wants to be a scoundrel like Locky Lock. Think about it, I mean really think about it with your brain and not your heart. With all the things we do to get by, is this right for her? Do we even have the right to impose our way of life on her?”

Hemlock places a hand on her knee and leans forward. “You're overthinking this. None of us can know that, not even her. She has to spend time in the world to know her place in it. We already went through this. We ain't gonna pressure her to stay, nor push her away either. She seems to enjoy our company as much as we enjoy

hers, and having friends will ground and help form how she wants to live. 'Sides, she slid right into our way of talking to each other and our way of thinking without any prompts. Her feelings, personality, and dreams mirror our own. Mostly. That ain't ever happened with no one and us before. Sometimes... things happen for a reason, Lil. Her trapped in the catacombs for a week or so and us being essentially forced to come back to Feymist so soon... That bounty being on the Loser Board instead of being thrown over to the Crossguards... Life beat the four of us down so we could meet. It's... fate.”

Oak joins Lily on their shared bed, takes off her sneakers, and tosses them in a heap with Lily’s boots. “That's one of the things we were talking about on the way to the boards. She's real excited to get to know us, read our books on nature and magic, make genuine friends... She practically begged me to take her to the docks tomorrow just to see a ship come in, even after I told her it's just a bunch of loud machines and louder people.” Oak shakes her head. “I get the feeling she wouldn't have told us that story about the Reveal if she didn't trust us and want to know us more. That's a story she was saving for someone special, I'm sure of it.”

Lily nods and smiles. “The fact neither of you said what I was thinking is enough for me to know we're doing this for the right reasons. I do think it's right for her, I just wanted to hear it from you two.”

“What were you thinking?”

“That we were doing it to freshen up our act. I didn't want it to be like we were kidnapping her and using her to make ourselves more successful.”

Oak slips her arm around Lily's shoulders and pulls her tight against her. “Dork. Since when did we ever care about money? When have we ever done anything like that? We've had plenty of opportunities before with people with far more theatrical backgrounds and we didn't take them. Even if all the tips dry up, even if no one comes to our shows anymore, even if we lose our Freelancing licenses, we'll find a way to get by that's right for us. We don't *need* Coy, we *want* her to travel with us. And she was telling me she's excited to be with us too. That's just doubt creeping in, babe.”

“Yeah... Ok! Enough doubting! Tomorrow, we show her around town, stop by Knoll Ave to see the folks there, and get lunch and dinner at the tavern. Just four friends hanging out and enjoying life. And get her some clothes besides just jeans and a tank. Seriously, how isn't she freezing to death? ...And see if Apricot can whip up something to keep her from being so hungry and tired after using magic, seeing as that's how she deals with the world. The bounty money should carry us for a while. (sniff sniff) One thing magic isn't a good substitute for is a shower. You can broach that subject, babe. As for myself, I'm bushed, I'm getting jammies on.”

Hemlock gestures to Sequoia. "Hah, just noticed something."

"Oh?"

"Look. She could've taken the couch but chose to make this instead. The mattress bridges the gap between the three of us, uniting us as one. She's the piece of us that was missing." Lily and Oak fall silent at that, letting the words sink in. "Pffft nerds. You should see the looks on your faces. Can't believe you were sucked in by something so sappy. 'Ooooh Hemlock, you're soooo wise and thoughtful, that was sooooo deep.' Knuckleheads."

Oak throws her socks at Hemlock, who barely dodges them. "Jerk. Still tho, you joke but there is something... symbolic about it. Maybe you were onto something with that fate stuff."

"Psh, I'll say anything when I'm tired."

Lily trots over to the dresser and pulls out two pairs of pajama bottoms and some old tshirts. "Except nothing. C'mon sweetie, let's get some shuteye. I'd like to get up early enough to cook some breakfast."

"Yes ma'am." Lily pulls a spare blanket out of the dresser, tosses Hemlock's coat off of Sequoia, drapes the blanket over her, and slips one of her pillows under her head. She hands Oak her pajamas and they get changed. Hemlock takes off her jeans and overshirt, sleeping in her

boxers and tank. She carelessly drapes the blanket over herself and is out like a light. Oak wraps herself around Lily and pulls the blanket tight over them. They're fast asleep.

An hour or two falls off the clock. Sequoia stirs, pulling the blanket tight over her, her eyes fluttering open. Her voice is hardly a whisper. "(Doing this for the right reasons, huh... Thanks for thinking so much about how I feel gals... That alone lets me know I did this for the right reasons...)" Sequoia closes her eyes and buries her face in the pillow. "(What did you have to give up for my happiness, my creator...)"

## Chapter 5

Light streams into the van through the windshield, casting a beam across the vacant mattress in the middle of the floor. Birds chirp nearby, and Lily opens her eyes and rubs them. She looks over to see Sequoia under the blankets with them, all snuggled up against Oak's back. "Psst... Oak, you up?"

Oak's purring loudly, a dopey smile plastered on her sleeping face. "Not there Lil... lower... prrrrr... there, right there..."

"Haha, what?"

“What about tuna... only salmon? Dun wan that...”

“(She’s being way too cute to wake up. She’ll get up when she smells breakfast. Hah, probably Coy too.)” Lily wriggles out from Oak’s clutches, and shimmies down the bed. Oak turns in her sleep to Sequoia and wraps her arms around her. Lily stops for a moment and picks up the sound of a flute being played outside. She looks over at Hemlock’s bed and sees it as empty as Sequoia’s. “(Huh? Hemlock’s up?)” Lily heads over to the fridge and pulls out a carton of eggs, a rash of bacon, a few potatoes, and a hunk of sourdough starter. She places all this in a milk crate with a frying pan, a knife, a spatula, three plates and a cutting board. She reaches into a cabinet and pulls out another plate and heads outside. The strong smell of percolating coffee and smoke hits her as soon as she leaves the door, and she walks over to a stump next to Hemlock in front of the campfire and starts unpacking the ingredients for breakfast. “What’s up, buttercup?”

Hemlock puts down the flute and gestures to the four mugs she’s got set out on a stump. “Not a thing, butterbean. Have a seat, get some coffee. Need a hand with breakfast?”

“Nah, I’m good. ‘Preciate it, tho.” She looks to the side of Hemlock and notices the large pile of firewood. “Besides, seems like you've been busy enough this morning. What's on your mind?”



“What, I gotta be stressed out to get up early and do some chores? I thought we knew each other, Lil.”

“Dummy. That’s why I said it.” Both have a small laugh. Lily sniffs the air and somehow notices a scent underneath the coffee and smoke. “Have you been casting metal?”

“Good nose, beautiful. Not a lot, just a little bit of the copper. Woke up at sunrise and couldn't go back to sleep, and got to thinking about that story Coy told. And about those Knights of Cecilia creeps.”

“More like you were thinking about Suuuuuuuunflower.”

“Huh? No, she ain’t even one of them. Don’t start w-”

Lily waves her fingers like a cartoon conductor.  
“♪Hemlock and Sunflower hiding in a bush.  
H-A-T-E-F-U-C-♪”

Hemlock clutches her head and moans. “Noooo stopstopstop! And people think Oak and I are weird.”

“Hehe. My revenge for last night is complete. So what about those KnoCs.” Lily hooks the pan over the fire and tosses the bacon in it before dicing the potatoes.

“Kinda got worried about them coming to look for Coy, so I made a copper charm I hammered a rune into for her. Might just be me being paranoid, might be that it

doesn't do anything, but I figured if it makes her feel more 'real' or 'solid', then it might keep the KnoCs from finding her. If they're even looking. That story she told last night about the orc tribe's runes keeping the goddess's eyes off the demons... I believe this will help. If'n they even use whatever magic Cecilia used, which I doubt. Actually, I was waiting for Oak to get up so I could talk to her about that book she mentioned about pact-summoning demons. Maybe there's stuff in there that we should know about that can help keep her safe. Probably just my sleep deprived brain overthinking things."

Lily peels off the bacon and tosses it on a plate, then tosses the potatoes into the pan. She stirs them up and pours herself a cup of coffee, blowing on it before taking a sip. "Nah, I know what you mean. It's a good idea, and it'll be good to see you two collaborating on... paranormal... stuff instead of butting heads." The potatoes sizzle in the pan for a few moments, soaking up the bacon grease, and nothing is said between the two. Oak comes out of the van, still wearing her pajamas and holding a book, and rubs her eyes. "Speaking of, g'morning beautiful. Sorry it's salmon for breakfast and not tuna."

"Morning Lil, Lock." Oak walks over and kisses Lily on the cheek before peering in the pan. "Whaddya mean, that ain't fish..."

"You were talking in your sleep and purring up a storm. Something about not wanting salmon and

wanting tuna instead? Sounds like you're still half asleep. Didja wake Coy up?"

Oak pours herself some coffee and grips it to her like a life preserver in shark infested waters. "Haha yeah, that sounds like me. Yeah, Coy woke up basically when I did, when Hemlock wailed like a banshee a few minutes ago. It's half me still waking up, half me having to work at convincing Coy to take a shower. She was all 'Hygiene is to ward off disease, right? I can just do that without a shower. Seems a waste of time.' 'No, Coy, you miss the point, you're cleaning off grime and bacteria but not the sulfur smell and oily hair.' 'Is it unhygienic to smell like sulfur and have oily hair?' 'No, b-' 'So what's the point?' Anyways, you can probably imagine how it went from there. Had to go at it from the 'it's what topsiders do and blending in' angle. Even then, it took telling her how by the time she's done we'll have food ready to push her over the edge."

Lily scoops out the potatoes and tosses them over the bacon, then cracks the entire carton of eggs into the pan. "Shoulda started with that, honestly. I knew you could handle it."

"Barely..."

Hemlock nods at Oak and gestures to the book she's holding. "What's with the book, Oak?"

“Oh yeah. It's my book on pact-summoning. Wanted to go through it again and see if there's something we should know. It's about two centuries old or so, so probably out of date, and obviously it doesn't really say anything about folks in her position, but look, here: Says you have to keep silver far away from the summoning circle. She might have a silver allergy. Not like we can afford silver, but we should keep that in mind. Also, w-what's with that look, Hemlock?”

“Great minds think alike. Catch.” and she tosses Oak the copper charm she cast this morning. Oak barely manages to drop the book in time to catch the charm. She looks it over.

“What's this? Some scribbles on a hunk of copper?”

Hemlock rolls her eyes. “Har har har. You know what it is.”

Oak grins smugly at Hemlock. “Yeah, I just wanted to mess with you. Looks real good, and discreet too. Thinking about those KnoCs?”

“You know it, gorgeous. What're you thinking?”

Oak picks up her book and flips through it. “Banishment stuff and how to stop them. This book's from the summoner's perspective, so I figure it's the most useful to see if that's something we should worry about, and if so, how to prevent it.” She flips through the book

carefully, scanning each page as she goes. “Yep, there's a pretty gross paragraph about using a silver dagger on the demon if you decide ‘nah this is a bad idea actually’. It also has a section on etching a sigil into an article of clothing if you intend on keeping the demon up here for longer than a few minutes so if anyone, like the Knights of Cecilia for example, tries to use a banishing ritual on them, it won't work. We'll talk to her at breakfast, see if that's cool with her.”

Nothing is said between the three of them. Hemlock picks up the flute and begins playing again. Lily scoops out the eggs and lays the hunk of sourdough in the pan, smooshing it down with the spatula and making sure to push down any bubbles that form. Oak flips through the book some more. Lily looks over her shoulder at Oak. “Did she remember moving in the middle of the night to cuddle up?”

Oak smiles warmly, looking down at the book and sipping her coffee. “Nah, she was really flustered at first, it was kinda cute. I told her we're real free with each other and it's not a big deal. I told her you determine your own comfort and asked if she wanted to just sleep in our bed tonight with us and she said she'd think about it. She probably made that mattress last night for nothing, honestly.”

“Tried telling her that. Ah well. Saves us from having to build a bunk bed. Wasn't looking forward to

abandoning our 'mattress on the floor' lifestyle." Lily peels the bread off the pan and flips it, using the spatula to divide it into 4 pieces.

The door to the van swings open and Sequoia steps out. "You didn't tell me showers are comfortable, Oak. I wouldn't have kicked up a fuss if I had known."

Oak laughs. "Yeah well, you take a few thousand of them in your life and you kinda take 'em for granted. Thanks for humoring me, tho."

"Gonna take a bit to get used to the weird smell of that gooey soap tho. So what's up? Got a mug of water?"

Lily looks back from the pan of bread she's frying up. "Ah crap, I forgot." She nods her head over at the mugs on a stump. "We got a mug here for you, you can go back in the van and use the faucet to fill it up. If you need help working that, Oak can help. Or you can just have regular ol' topsider coffee we already have out here. But if you're too good for mundane coffee that Hemlock slaved over a hot fire for hours I understand..."

"Haha, whatever. I'll just have some of that, then." Sequoia pours herself a mug of coffee and dips her finger in it, the color lightening. She sits next to Oak and blows the steam off and takes a sip. "Pretty good honestly. Lil strong, but I kinda need it. So whatcha been talking about?"

Hemlock puts down the flute and stares right into Sequoia's eyes. "You." They lock eyes for a long few moments, staring each other down, before Sequoia cracks and starts laughing. "I hope that never gets old. Hey Oak, pass that charm over to her."

Oak hands Sequoia the charm Hemlock spent the morning making. She turns it over in her hand and examines it closely. "Oh? One of your runes?"

"Yep. If you liked my coat so much you wanted to sleep in it, I figured you'd probably like something like that. Who knows, might keep Cecilia's eyes off you. If'n she's even watching anymore. Y'gotta wear it, not just shove it in your pocket. That clip should fit 'round your jeans' belt loops pretty good."

"Aw, that's real thoughtful, thanks. Pretty, too." Sequoia fiddles with the clasps and manages to get it around her jeans' belt loop. "But why'd you really make it."

Lily divides the food up on the plates and hands them to everyone. She tosses all the leftovers in the pan and sets it on a stump between all of them. Hemlock tears off a hunk of the bread and crams it in her mouth. "Ah, ya got me. There's a group'a creeps out there that call themselves the 'Knights of Cecilia'. We usually just use their acronym, KnoCs. They apparently monitor shifts in reality and investigate when they detect something amiss. Y'can probably piece together from the name why.

Figured if back in the old times the old gods' runes could keep Cecilia from seeing demons, might be helpful for avoiding those assholes.”

Sequoia lifts a forkful of egg to her mouth and blows on it. “That is thoughtful. Thanks Hemlock. Uhm. What do they do if they find a major shift?”

Lily pours herself another cup of coffee and looks down into it. “I guess it depends? They only asked us if we learned our lesson and told us to cut that shit out. Confiscated our book and half of Oak’s collection at sword point that same day, too. Don't wanna think about what they woulda done if we did something way way stronger.” Oak covers her eyes with her hand and rubs her forehead while grimacing. Lily pinches herself. “Ah shit.”

Sequoia tears off two small bits of the bread, puts the egg and bacon between it and pops it in her mouth. “Yeah, they do sound like huge jerks. Hope they don't mind being busy for the rest of my natural life.”

Hemlock laughs between bites. “That’s the best damn thing I’ve heard all week. You’ll do great up here, Coy.”

“Now I just gotta practice what to do if we meet them.” She picks up a forkful of potatoes and stares at them before shoveling it in her mouth. “Maybe make the inside of their sheaths real sticky or put sharp rocks in their boots or step up my game and make it so they always hover a couple inches off the ground. They could



use their swords as oars.” Everyone laughs at that, and a silence falls over the scene. “Hey uhm, so, I'm not dumb, y'know? Not that I think you think I am but like... Am I failing my classes? For sure, but only because I want to. Am I naive? That'll fade in time. I already figured out last night that the three of you did some crazy stuff with reality rituals just from how Oak was talking. You must get taken to the mats on poker night.”

Hemlock looks pointedly at her. “Nothing escapes you, does it. It just buzzes around the inside'a your skull til it lands on your brain.”

Sequoia shrugs and tucks into more of the bread. “It just seems to make the three of you uncomfortable talking about whatever you did so I wasn't gonna say nothing. Kinda forced my hand here, because you seem all awkward, but like... don't worry, ok? I wanna hear your stories but you don't have to feel uncomfortable talking about stuff because I only care in the sense that it seems to be personal and important to the three of you. If you want to tell me, you'll tell me when you're ready. If you don't, I'm not gonna ask, it's cool. Say what you want, don't say what you don't want, and know that if Lily told me she was a literal sprout I wouldn't be surprised or think it's weird. It's whatever. I'm chill about it, so stop making that face, Oak.”

Lily lifts her mug up to her lips. “You wouldn't be surprised?”

Sequoia plasters a grin on her face. “With the way you go on about plants? No way, I kinda was hoping you were. It'd at least explain you being so into them.”

Everyone laughs at that. Real easy laughers, these gals. Oak pushes the food around her plate half-heartedly, staring down at it. “It's not like I thought you wouldn't notice and it's not like we're hiding anything horrible we did, it's just... y'know, personal.”

“Oak.”

“Sequoia.”

Sequoia's eyes grow large. “I was literally a featureless imp created from nothingness by an ageless demon crow in Hell and made the conscious choice to look and be like I am now when I became of age.” Her face softens and she scoops up some more eggs. “In part just to piss off my creator and teachers. So I'm real weird and get it, y'know? You can chill, you're worrying about nothing. We're all a buncha weirdos and losers. It's fine, doesn't change my view or opinion of any of you.”

Hemlock shovels the last of her food in her mouth and sets the plate aside. She scratches the back of her neck as she chews, and looks up at the sky as she finishes. “Ah, we should just get it outta the way. She seems to have an idea of what happened anyways, and if the audience already knows, the storyteller shouldn't put it off. We'll have to tell her sometime, and I'd rather that be sooner

rather than later and from us. Lifts the weight of it off our shoulders and lets us talk more freely. It's up to you, Oak."

Oak fidgets with her tail and looks down at it, not meeting Sequoia's gaze. "...Yeah, you're right. So uhm. Remember on the beach... no that's weird... uhm..." Oak lets out her breath and rubs her forehead. "Hemlock just tell it for me. I haven't had enough coffee for this."

Hemlock laughs to herself and leans back against a tree. "Sorry for making you squirm a bit, girly. I just wanted to see how you'd do. Yeah Sequoia, Oak here used a reality altering ritual. Traded half her library for a specific book that changed the reality of your physical form. Gotta hand it to the folks who wrote that book, they made it pretty explicit that even if you got everything 100% right, the backlash would be pretty rough, even with the mitigation sigils written in that book. About five years ago, when she performed it, it didn't go 100% right."

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Inside the van, five years ago. There's not nearly as much stuff in the van as there is now, but the inside is far more cramped, with boxes stacked from the floor to the ceiling and totally obscuring the walls. There's barely enough room in the aisle for the pentagram Oak's drawn with chalk on the floor. A candle is lit at each point, the only lighting inside the van, and between each point is a dagger piercing a piece of paper at very specific angles

with writing on them and the floor. All along the boxes, nearly covering every square inch save for the door, are slips of paper with sigils. Lily leans against some boxes with her arms folded, looking down on Oak in the center of the pentagram. You can tell it's Oak because of the haircut, but... not much else. Her hair is a mousy brown, and even through the loose fitting black robe she's wearing, you can tell she's much larger than we're used to. Taller, sure, but broader too. No silly cat's tail or ears adorn her, everything is where it should be. In that regard, anyway. In front of her, inside the pentagram, is a bowl of smoldering herbs, with thin wisps of smoke peeling off of them and hitting her in the face, with a bowl of thick brown liquid next to it. She sits up and clears her throat. She smiles a satisfied smile to herself as she surveys the scene. "There, that's the last of the preparations. All the lines are drawn perfectly, I got the emergency sigils on the walls, I'm in the exact center... it's time." She looks up at Lily and her smile fades. "Last chance to leave the van, hon. I know we've talked about this, but... I don't-"

Lily, who looks almost exactly the same save five years younger, lets annoyance seep into her expression. "Oak. I love you baby but if you try to talk me out of being in the van again I'm gonna dope slap you into next week." She slips back into a smile. "Your fate is my fate, and always will be. Unlike a certain hedge witch I could name, I'm not gonna try to talk you out of this. I believe in you. You got this."

Oak manages a weak smile. "Please, I'm only doing this to see the look on Hemlock's face tonight. We won't be disturbed, right?"

Lily nods. "Yep. Lock said the shingles alone will take til noon. We have tons of time."

Oak lets her breath out in one quick blow and folds her legs under her. "Good. Showtime." She removes a book from her robe and flips to a specific page and begins reading from it. She pours some of the brown liquid into the herbs and then drinks from it. The papers on the wall and the two girls' hair begin blowing as a strong breeze rips through the closed and cramped van. Oak keeps reading, concern obvious on her face. She begins to trip over the words, the candles begin flickering, and it's at that moment the door to the van slams open, banging hard against the much smaller art desk. Lily and Oak jump in shock, and in stomps Hemlock, recognizable only by those dumb pointy ears, red hair, scar, and prodigious height.

Hemlock's voice booms with anger through the van. "Can you believe it?! That fucking psycho showed up on the job *again*! Told the owner that she'll work out a discount with the Builder's Guild and had me thrown off the property without pay!" Hemlock's scowl eases into a sly grin. "Got my revenge, tho. You shoulda seen the look on Sunflower's face when... I cat called..." Hemlock's eyes

grow wide, only now noticing the other two and the scene going on. “Uhm, what are you two doing?”

Lily’s face twists in anger and she focuses her momentum in her fist as she rushes towards Hemlock. “OUT!” and she slams her palm into Hemlock’s chest, sending Hemlock flying towards the door. “Th-The door?!” The door slams shut on its own and Hemlock’s head strikes the door hard and Hemlock slumps in a heap on the floor, unconscious. The light from the candles is snuffed out and darkness consumes the van. A long few moments pass as Lily catches her breath. “Oak? Oak are you ok?”

Lily’s greeted with several moments of silence, finally broken by a sweet, soft, and unfamiliar voice. “Could you turn on the lights, please?”

Lily’s eyes go wide. “Whoa, your voice.” Lily flips on the light switch, and hunched up in a ball is Oak as we know her today. She’s practically swimming in her robe. She takes her hands away from her face and looks at them, then tugs at the hair in front of her face.

“Purple? My hair’s purple now? That’s pretty cool.”

Lily stammers for a few moments and lifts her hand to her mouth. “Holy shit, Oak!”

Oak winces and covers where her ears ought to be with her hands. “Ow! Not so loud hon- ... Where are my ears?”

“Uhm... try atop your head.”

“A-atop?!” Oak feels the top of her head and she tugs on an ear. “Ah! What the hell!” Her eyes grow wide and she looks behind her, seeing movement under the robe. She pulls it back and there’s her goofy looking tail. “A t-t-tail?!”

Lily bites her lip. “Be cool, Oak. Take it one step at a time. You’re whole, you’re alive, you’re safe. Focus on that. Everything’s going to be ok, ok babe?”

“Ok. Okokokokok. Ok. Assess. Live in the moment. Center yourself, Oak. I can see the floor of the van, brown and dirty. I can hear the wind outside, feel it lightly shaking the van. I can smell the snuff of smoke from the candles.” She breathes deep, and lets her breath out slowly, just like she was taught. “Ok. I’m cool. Let’s see how bad I fucked up the rest of me. ... I need a mirror.” She stands up and she practically falls through the robe. Her face turns beet red. “Oops. How much did I shrink?” She bends down to pick the robe back up, looking over herself as she does. She sees a perfectly average looking girl. Well, except that silly tail. Maybe a bit of baby fat still on her, but she is only eighteen. “Haha, I did it! I mean, I totally fucked myself up in the process but I did it!” Oak is almost bursting with excitement as she pulls the robe back over

herself and cinches the belt as far as it'll go, holding it up on her with her free hand. She stumbles to the bathroom and looks herself over in the mirror. "Whoa, my face. It's... It's better than I hoped for. ... Thank goodness I didn't mess up my eyes. These ears are soooo weird but..." She turns her head to Lily, who's leaning against the bathroom's door jamb, her arms folded. "Is it weird that I don't mind them? I mean, the tradeoff is worth it."

"And the tail?"

"Is going to take some getting used to. I'm ok now, I'm not freaking out. Everything will be ok. I've always been weird, now I'm just... well... weird but comfortable. This feels so good, Lil, I can't even describe how *right* I feel right now. ... Everything looks so big now." She looks over Lily and tilts her head, noticing the clothes on her are even looser than usual. "...Except you?"

"I think it got me too. I used to be eye level with the shelf above the toilet."

Oak's excitement melts off her face and concern replaces it. "Oh shit, baby, I'm sorry... I..."

Lily shakes her head and crosses her arms. "Don't even start apologizing for that. I told you, your fate is my fate. A couple inches isn't going to make a difference." Lily shrugs. "The only downside is now I'll need to get even smaller clothing and costumes. Now c'mere you." and Lily takes Oak's hand and pulls her tight against her.



Oak wraps her arms around Lily and buries her face in her hair, laughing a bit to herself, before bending down and kissing Lily. They hold each other for a long few moments, Oak rubbing Lily's back, when she suddenly stops. "Wait."

Lily seems to sense the same thing. "Oh shit."

Both of them look at each other with wide eyes and speak in unison. "Hemlock!" and they rush out of the bathroom and look down at Hemlock crumpled up on the floor. She looks pretty much like she does these days, save for having much longer hair. Oak puts her hands to her mouth. "Oh shit."

"*That's* putting it mildly."

"OhshitoHshitoHshitoHshit"

"Get a grip Oak, we'll get through this."

Oak pinches herself and takes a deep breath, letting it out slowly. "R-right. Are... they alive?"

"I didn't hit them *that* hard. Didn't even think it'd knock them out. Must've hit their head on the door."

"Yeah but it's been like... five minutes. It looks like they're breathing tho..."

"They just need a gentler beating." And Lily bends down and slaps Hemlock's cheeks. "Hey, Hemlock! Wake up, dumbass!"

Hemlock starts stirring, clutching her head. Oak and Lily are bent over her, looking down with worry and concern. Hemlock grits her teeth and squints her eyes. "Wazzah... Lil? Goddamn Lil, you already beat the shit outta me, d'ya haveta..." Hemlock's eyes grow wide. She clears her throat and hardens her expression again. "Do y'gotta slap me as... What the hell's up with my voice? What'd you do, kick me in the nuts for good measure?"

Oak rubs the back of her neck and bites her lip. "Something like that?"

Lily shoots a nasty look at Oak. "Seriously? Now?! We can rip on each other later, this isn't the time!"

"Seems to me this is the perfect time. Not like I'm gonna have that opportunity again."

Hemlock scowls up at Oak. "And who the hell are- ... The only girl I know of that bites her lip like that is Oak. ...Is that you, girly?"

Oak gives a short laugh. "Ah, they figured it out so fast. I feel robbed."

Hemlock's annoyance turns to excitement and pure joy. "You finally did it! You look fucking amazing! Lemme get a better look." And she starts pushing herself up against the door.

Lily and Oak both wave their hands and shout "Nonono don't-"

Hemlock props herself up on the door and her eyes go wide. “Uhm?” She looks down at herself and tugs on her shirt and pants. “Uhm????”

Lily grimaces. “-sit up. We wanted you to take it slow, big fella. You came in basically at the worst possible time. We ah... thought you were gonna be gone all day and it was the perfect opportunity to finally do this.”

Oak shakes her head and gives a weak smile. “That and we thought it’d be funny to see the look on your face. Classic goof. Except... Well... We did say before there was gonna be a pretty harsh backlash, right? Guess who took the brunt of that?”

Lily grabs Hemlock by the collar and pulls her up further on the door. “The big oaf who kicks in the damn door like we live in a barbarian movie!”

Hemlock shrugs, her eyes still wide. “My bad. Nevermind that for now, let’s get a look atcha, Oak.” Hemlock looks her up and down, reaches up, and pets between her ears. She gives Oak a warm smile. “What’s all this? You didn’t say anything about this before. If you wanted a cat so bad, you could’ve just asked. Guess this saves room in the van tho.”

Oak laughs nervously. “Jerk. I didn’t mean to do this... My concentration was already real rattled *before* you kicked in the door, and when you said cat called it just... stuck in my brain.” Oak gets a sheepish look on her face.

“You actually probably did Lily and me a favor. I could tell I was losing control of it but couldn’t stop it. This was way outta my league. Should’ve known it’d be too much for me to handle responsibly.”

Hemlock frowns and crosses her arms. “That shit don’t matter. What matters is, how do you feel? Are you comfortable? Happy? Relieved?”

Oak smiles warmly down at Hemlock. “With all that just happened to you... dummy... Yeah, yeah I am. Enormously so. The... ears and tail are really weird but... Kinda cool? I didn’t get it 100% right? But I got it right enough for me. It’s pretty much exactly what I needed.” Oak’s eyes start to mist up and her mouth quivers, her bravery faltering. “Hemlock, I... I don’t know what to say. I’m so sor-”

Hemlock shakes her head and stands up and wraps Oak up in a big hug. “Don’t even start apologizing for shit that ain’t your fault. I’m just... I’m just so happy for you right now. So just enjoy this moment and don’t think about the rest. Your big day and you’re worried about my stupid ass? Not on my watch girly. I’ll be ok, you know I don’t care about shit like that. C’mon and get in on this, Lil.” and she reaches over and pulls Lily in by her shoulder and ensnares her in the embrace. “We’re all safe and we’re all whole. That’s all I care about.”

Lily's eyes go wide. "Oh!" and she plasters on her wicked smile. "I could get used to soft Hemlock."

Hemlock just laughs. "Guess that also means I ain't gonna hog the bathroom to shave each morning anymore. It'll be ok. We got our whole lives to figure that out, but only this moment to live in. Let's make it count."

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Sequoia shoves the last bit of bread in her mouth and talks between bites. "I could tell you're a big tenderheart deep down from last night, Hemlock. I didn't know you could be so sappy too."

Hemlock laughs. "Seriously?! After a story like that, that's what you say?!"

"Hehe. Sorry, couldn't help myself. Joking aside, this doesn't mean I see her or you as anything but who you are. It's not even really a thing to me, anyone who worries about stuff like that when it doesn't even affect them are grossos." Sequoia shrugs and chases the bread with some coffee. "The way the three of you were going on, I figured you like... turned part of the ocean to blood or diluted the time of a forest fire so it'll take a thousand years to finish or something. Thanks for telling me that weird ass story, Oak and Hemlock. Making it a real challenge for me to plumb the depths of my history in Hell to top that one."

Oak gives a short laugh. "You can try! Thanks for being so cool about it. I don't know if anyone in Hell deals with stuff like that, but it's kind of an embarrassing big deal to us. Does anyone *need* to do what I did to be the people they are at heart? No, they're always her. Or him. Or them. And so on. Living true to yourself til you're comfortable is all you need. Pills, magic, etc aren't necessary for everyone. But was it what *I* needed? Yes, a thousand times yes, and glad I did. And y'know what, I may have fucked up and overreached my skill, but not that much. Well, only because of Hemlock. I don't even wanna know what would've happened if she hadn't interrupted it. No one ever gets what they really want in life, you just find a place you're comfortable and deal with the hand you got, and that's where I ended up." Oak rubs the back of her neck and laughs nervously. "I'm kinda glad I'm not 100% human anymore? As weird as that sounds? Technically, my continental ID card says my race is 'Human (Variant)'."

Sequoia takes another long pull from her coffee and gets up to pour herself more. "I get it, you know? I tried a lot of forms before I settled on this one. Being a crow was the weirdest, and Mahog just mocked me for it anyways." Sequoia screws up her face in mock annoyance and turns to face everyone, putting one hand on her hip and waving her coffee around. "'Oh so you're ready to take on the big game, huh? Think you got what it takes to take down your old creator? Huh? You don't even know shit about being a

crow. Yeah that's right, better change your form. Don't come to the schoolyard if you're not ready to throw down." She walks back over to her spot on the stump and sits down, lightening her coffee with her finger. "I thought it was just an infatuation with topsiders at first, but I couldn't deny I was happiest as a topsider girl, or as close as we're allowed to get, and that wasn't going away. This is what I'm happiest and most comfortable with, and I figure it's the same with you." She shrugs and brings the coffee to her lips. "The thing I've learned the most since coming up here is that bodies are gross and weird, but they're ours to do with as we want. It's literally the only thing a person can own. I can't be anyone else but me, so how can I ever say that someone isn't something they are?" Sequoia rolls her eyes skyward and thinks for a moment. "That doesn't make sense but that's what I feel." She levels her gaze at Oak and smiles. "You're a-ok in my book, Oak. Get it? A-ok being an anagram of Oak... nevermind. I was trying to lighten the mood. Like I said, we're all weird and losers. You're happy, you're you, and that's all that there can be."

Hemlock drains her coffee in one gulp and gets up to get some more. "As for me, I actually had a pretty easy time of things. Oak was freaking out over nothing. It's like I was saying last night, it's all just arbitrary, meaningless rules and categories a buncha old dead dudes made up a couple centuries before I was even born. Gender ain't real, it's all just a system of control society pushes onto you to

make you behave and dress certain ways. Just another log on the pyre of conformity. I didn't feel uncomfortable or wrong, like Oak did before. All in all, I felt pretty normal still. I never really cared about stuff like that before, and it ain't like I particularly care now."

Lily snickers. "But we do. She was totally uncuddleable before. It was like trying to snuggle up with a rock. Now we loooove cuddles, it's the only reason she never tried to find a way back."

Hemlock folds her arms, her eyes closed in annoyance. "Are you done? Cuz I'm expressing myself over here. Anyways, I just acted naturally and ended up happy. Funny how that works, ain't it? Either or none is fine. It's whatever. I'm me, and I'll always be me, regardless of anything else. What my shell looks like ain't important. I don't really see myself as anything, probably more a gal than anything else and that's how most folks approach me, and I've never corrected anyone on any pronouns. That shit ain't important to me, I got more important things to worry about." She chuckles to herself. "Like how to get around Harvey's 'Hemlock drink limit'." Hemlock puts her hand on her knee and leans forward. "People can say whatever the hell they want, doesn't mean they're right. Buncha morons who never bothered to learn anything about anyone, let alone learn to love them. They're not even worth thinking about. We've got our world, and it's all we need. The three of us formed



unbreakable bonds because of that day. I wouldn't change a thing."

Sequoia puts her finger on her chin and searches the sky for birds. "Sorry I was thinking about that cool helmeted bug we threw back into the ocean. Can you repeat that?"

Hemlock scowls. "Oh I was just curious if they taught you how to swim in Hell. Wanna go to the beach later? I wanna show you how hard I can throw a hundred pound demon."

"Hehe, sorry, it's just so fun to tease you. Classic bit." Sequoia looks deep in her coffee. "So... Feymist and the tavern..."

"Yeah, we stopped there before. It ain't like I was ever forbidden from or uncomfortable going to the Boar, and no one really cared that I was there. Tabby knew me as well as she knew Oak and Lily, and she acted like it wasn't a big thing. Kinda like you. Said she 'always had a feeling' and that plenty of trans gals like Oak and me were regulars. By then I had gotten used to myself and Oak and Lily were already using she/her with me, but it was kinda weird hearing that at first. I guess she ain't wrong, tho." Hemlock wears a wolfish grin. "It was too emotionally complicated to deal with so I started flirting instead, and we still do that five years later. Act natural and you'll be happy." Hemlock shrugs. "We were all good friends with

the folks on Knoll Ave already and the biggest fuss anyone made was Turk and Delbruk when they realized they had an opportunity to sell me a new wardrobe. If anything, it just made people more comfortable with me. Anyway, that very night the KnoCs kicked in our door, confiscated our book and some of Oak's collection at sword point, and gave us a note to take to the Department of Information so's we could update our IDs without static. It's all water under the bridge. You deserved to know who you're living and traveling with, and we needed to clear the air and explain how we feel cuz we wanna talk freely with you. Sorry about the rambling drama and philosophy bullshit. That was a long time ago and we're now perfectly happy and functional maladjusted losers. All the issues over that stuff was settled years ag-"

Hemlock reaches for the leftovers at the same time Sequoia goes to scoop up a chunk of egg from the pan with her fork. They freeze, and stare each other down before shoveling as much food on their own plate as quickly as they can and eating as fast as they can. Oak slumps forward and hangs her head. "Guess we better go grocery shopping soon. Again."

Lily shakes her head. "And cook larger meals. Seriously, someone that small can eat like Hemlock? Screw the dwindling crowds, we won't be able to perform anymore because we'll be busy cooking twenty-four seven. Mind if I get a shower in babe?"

“Only if I can come with.”

“As much as I’d like that, don’t you have something else you should be doing?”

Oak thinks to herself. “Do I? Oh right, the sigil. Tomorrow then?”

“It’s a date.”

Lily walks back into the van and shuts the door. Oak shakes her head sadly at the sight before her. She clears her throat. “Ahem. Coy.”

Sequoia’s head snaps towards Oak, and she pops some potatoes in her mouth. “Mmf?”

Hemlock raises her arms in the air, mouth stuffed with food. “I win!”

Sequoia shoots her a look. “Only because Oak interfered with our duel. What’s up?”

“How would you feel about me etching a sigil onto a piece of your clothing? On the inside only, promise.”

Sequoia tilts her head. “What kind of sigil?”

“I mentioned I had this book about pact-summoning demons last night and we were flipping through it while you were in the shower. Uhm.” Oak rubs the back of her neck and laughs nervously. “It’s kinda awkward to talk about but we uhm. Don’t know how your physiology

works? So we started with this book as a basis and made. Uhm. Assumptions? Anyways, says here etching a sigil in a piece of clothing and giving it to a demon when summoned will prevent them from being banished by an outside force, like those KnoCs. I don't even know if that'd work on you anyways, but better safe than sorry. Er. Sorry to be so blunt."

Sequoia laughs. "Of course I don't mind. I dunno which is sweeter to me, you being all flustered and cute over nothing or that the three of you took the time to consider that. The three of you may be the first heretics we don't torture."

Oak gives a nervous, stuttering laugh. "Haha uhm, you're joking right?"

Sequoia widens her eyes and leans forward. "Am I?"

Hemlock finishes the last of the food and sets her plate aside. "She is, Oak."

Sequoia leans back and smiles wide enough you can see her fangs. "So I am. They'll deeeeeefinitely send the three of you to the Business District. No time off for good behavior."

Oak pales and fiddles with her tail. "Uhm, anyways... I kinda feel like vegging out while I etch that sigil. By the time I'm done it'll be my turn for the shower. How about

we set up on the couch and put on an old kung fu flick? Kinda in the mood for something like that while I work.”

“What’s a flick?”

Oak works circles with her hand as she searches her brain for the right words. “It’s like... uhm, they’re... It’s best if you just see it for yourself.”

“Then hell yeah. You in, Hemlock?”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

## Chapter 6

Oak exits the bathroom, hair and tail damp, and fastens her belt as she walks to the gals on the couch. Hemlock’s on the bottom, wrapping her arms around Sequoia atop her, and Lily atop Sequoia, who’s wrapping her arms around Lily and has her hands folded on Lily’s tummy. On the TV, a kung fu warrior strikes the killing blow on his enemy and it cuts to him training a bunch of students. The credits roll and Lily hits the power button on the remote. Hemlock waves lazily to Oak. “Yo Oak. You gonna be ready to head out soon?”

“Yep! Just need to grab the posters and I’ll be set. Did Sun Tea stop the evil warlord at the end?”

Lily hops down from the pile and arches her back. “You know it. Good thing too, that warlord was about to wipe us all out for defying him. Luckily for us, the warlord was no match for Sun Tea's kung fu.”

Sequoia rolls off Hemlock and flops on the floor. She reaches over and pulls another cassette off the TV stand and examines it before putting it back. “You topsiders sure have come a long way. That was incredible.” She stands up, dusting herself off. “Uhm. What should I do for the show tomorrow?”

Lily is taken off guard for a moment. “Huh. Hadn't thought that far ahead.”

Hemlock sits upright on the couch and puts her hands behind her head. “Got your head in the soil again?”

Lily laughs. “Always! We always rehearse the day of the show, and there's a few roles where you don't have to memorize a huge amount of lines you could do. Hmm... It'd be nice for someone to work the donation box, and that way you can meet and talk to a lotta cool people.”

“What were those things in that, uhm, flickering thing? Special effects? What kinda special effects do you folks do?” All eyes turn to Sequoia, who fiddles with a nearby box of prop weapons. “Because I was thinking... you said it has a lot of fighting, right? Remember in the film right before Sun Tea created that weird jointed weapon and was using a metal staff and sparks were

flying? I could do stuff like that, or like... make sounds or lights or if there's anything that needs to float, I got that."

Oak grins as wide as her eyes. "I'll be sure to bring some markers for the posters. That's a fantastic idea, Coy."

"Markers?"

"Yep, so I can write the name of our newest member and sfx guru." Oak picks up a backpack and puts the roll of posters in it before slipping it on.

"What's a guru?"

Hemlock walks over to her bed and scoops her coat off of it. "Someone who gets the hell outta the van before it's noon so we can actually enjoy being in town."

Lily pulls some money out of a secure lock box and pockets it. "Oak's got the posters... I got the cash... First we should probably hit up the parts shop on the way to the docks, then ask if we can hang up some posters where the workers can see 'em, then see the folks on Knoll. The parts won't be too heavy or clunky and the parts store closes pretty early. We'll definitely be at Turk and Delbruk's shop for a while, so it makes sense. Everyone ready? Let's mosey."

The gals retrace their steps from the previous night. Down a worn path leading to the town, that eventually meets a sidewalk in the residential area of town, which eventually leads to downtown. Sequoia walks next to Lily

and stuffs her hands in her pockets. "Hey Lily, what was with that movie anyways?"

"The 800 Rooms of Shaw Ling? How do you mean?"

"I don't get it. If they're an ascetic sect of Cecilia worshippers, how do they have the energy to train so hard every day? Goopy rice doesn't seem like it'd be nutrient or calorie rich. If they believe in peace and non-violence, why do they teach such deadly kung fu? And why bother going through that whole 'we don't mess with the affairs of the outside world' spiel when they purposely sent Sun Tea out to kill a warlord and train a buncha dudes? And like... if you can just pop on a... whaddya call it... a movie, why would folks come to shows like y... Uhm, like ours?"

Lily rolls her hand in front of her. "As for the last part, it's because of the community and fellowship with others. No performance is the same either, we've done the Thief and the Throne dozens of times and it's always different. People also like certain actors, their way of doing things... Movies like that are fun because they're always the same, it's relaxing. Seeing them live is fun because they're exciting." Lily's face lights up and she looks slightly up to the sky as she brings her hands to her collarbone. "I've seen all of their movies a dozen times but if I knew the Draw Siblings were in town, I'd do the whole Loser Board! I bet their kung fu is even more thrilling live!" She slips into a slouch and kicks a pebble in her path. "Cept, y'know, those movies were made back in the seventies and



eighties. As for the rest, martial arts is a way of meditating with your body, it's not inherently violent. After all, none of the abbots killed folks, right? Their fights were only to hone their skills and the skills of their pupils; no malice, no anger, no intent to seriously injure each other, only the joy of improving yourself and others. Martial arts teaches discipline, calmness, and focus. You become a whole being, mind and body connected in one with the world, as it should be. Just like your magic or the Draw Sibs' martial arts; it can be used for entertainment, self-fulfillment, or violence, the skills themselves are neutral. That's the point, evil and good necessarily balance each other out through neutrality. Evil became too powerful, so good had to step in to prevent evil from taking over the land. Good becomes too rampant, it turns to oppression and evil, and the cycle repeats. Both had super good kung fu, didn't they? It's neutral. But then, good and evil are delusions, aren't they? No one does anything because they think it's evil. Take the warlord.”

“Please!” Reflexively telling dumb jokes is a trait Oak and Hemlock share, much to Lily’s annoyance.

Lily shoots Hemlock a look and trudges on. “He didn't consider the needs of all the people in the land, just his own, and wanted to see his people flourish, even at the expense of others. He felt they were preventing his people from flourishing so why should he consider their needs? Sun Tea saw him as a violent oppressor, which he was, and

gave his people the ability to fight back, while removing a major obstacle to revolution, balancing the equation. Or was it just revenge for killing his family? Can you honestly say Sun Tea got the enlightenment and wisdom the monastery offered, or did he simply use the skills they taught for his own benefit? Who actually considered others instead of themselves? We see hate as evil, because we see and know the pain it brings to everyone it touches. They see what they're doing as the best thing for them, theirs, or even sometimes society. You can't end hatred, only recognize it and minimize its impact. Are you slaying an oppressor out of love for everyone and the hope that unity is possible? Or are you doing it out of hate of someone who treats others cruelly, ensuring the cycle of violence never ends? That's why they sent Sun Tea out, to test his soul. That's why it's important to consider the feelings and needs of others, even those you think are evil, to avoid that trap of self-righteousness. Once you have the wisdom to see the vast implications of your actions, for all people for years to come, then you'll know what's right. That's the lesson you should take away."

Hemlock rolls her eyes. "Or Lily's just a big nerd who can't enjoy a dumb kung fu film without overthinking it. People who beat down folks weaker than them for their own benefit are objectively evil and need to be run out on a rail. Or the business end of a sword. If their ilk runs for the hills with them, all the better. They can all build the world's shittiest town and we can put a big stone bubble

over it and everyone's happy. Killing's always wrong but strength only has meaning when you use it to protect, not oppress, the weak. That's why Sun Tea did the right thing. He tried to resolve the conflict without death but the warlord wouldn't have it any other way. He forced Sun Tea's hand. That's why the abbots let him open the 800th room."

Lily weighs this for a moment, and gesticulates as she counters. "But then why let him train ordinary citizens without the enlightenment necessary to use that strength without hatred? Were they genuinely concerned about the people of the land? Were they like Sun Tea, their most gifted pupil, and becoming too worldly and lost sight of their goal of enlightenment and balance? Or did they simply want to teach Sun Tea a lesson by making him responsible for his beliefs?" She turns to Sequoia. "Of course, the actual historical Sun Tea was far more complex and opened a school for ordinary folks outside of Shaw Ling, using the skills they taught him. This is just a fun movie designed to make you think about the nature of our spirits."

Hemlock brow furrows and she hangs back to walk next to Lily. "I just told you, they did it because they knew that the warlord was objectively evil and needed to be stopped. They were worried that he'd bring that conflict to Shaw Ling and they'd have to fight anyways, costing the lives of many students. Cut off the head and the body will

die. Sending Sun Tea out saved many lives and was extremely wise. Letting him open up the 800th room ensured evil will always be countered, and balanced.”

“On its surface, yes, but the deeper-”

Sequoia waves the current argument away. “Are you two discussing philosophy to avoid answering the question? How'd he get totally shredded and buff on goopy rice!”

Lily laughs to herself and puts her hands behind her head. “I shoulda known.”

“Why do you think I asked that first?”

Oak hangs back to walk beside the other three, taking up the entirety of the worn path. Not like people can't walk in the grass around them if need be. “I think in part it's mostly good storytelling. It shows, rather than outright says, that they live meagerly. That ‘goopy rice’ is called congee, or gruel depending on local customs. Different ingredients, but basically the same stuff. It's very bland on its own, but has lots of protein that's needed to build up muscles, and carbohydrates for energy. To live an ascetic life isn't simply a lack of quantity, but a lack of sensation. Hence why it's so bland and cheap. It's way easy to digest too, so it's perfect for folks who are sick, young, or spend the entirety of their day working out. You can imagine why.”

Lily shakes her head and searches the ground for another pebble to kick, not finding any. “When I was at the monastery for a year, we mostly ate congee but we complemented it with vitamin rich food like bok choy and oranges to keep from being malnourished. Being away from Oak wasn't the only hard part of that year. I *lived* for those oranges, Coy.”

Sequoia reflexively puts a finger on her chin and stares at a cloud passing by overhead without lifting her head. “Why were you at a monastery? I thought you doubted Cecilia.”

Lily shrugs. “It was less about Cecilia and more about your own soul and mind. It’s the monastery mom went to when she was growing up, and her mom before her, and her mom before her, and etc, learning martial arts. She sent me there for a year to learn at least some of it, wanted to see if I took to it like she did. I got pretty far with it, far enough where I can do some pretty wild stuff for our shows, but I guess I’m too worldly still, cuz all I could think about was coming back home to Oak. And eating something besides congee.”

“Are the ingredients to congee five super bland ones and that’s what dulls the taste?”

“You should just read some of our books on *that* subject.”

“So I will.” They walk into the city limits proper, walking through the residential district and past some small cafes. Sequoia bops Hemlock on the shoulder. “Heyyyyyy Lock.”

Hemlock bops Sequoia on the head, between her horns. “Yooooo Coy.”

Sequoia looks up at Hemlock and points at the slash across her face. “How’d you get that gnarly scar, anyways? Did you fight a wicked strong monster and slay it just before succumbing to your injury?”

Hemlock smiles a big, doofy smile. “Nah, nothing like that. I cut myself shaving.”

“Wait, seriously?”

Hemlock nods. “Yeah, I used to use a straight razor to shave in the mornings way back. It’s cheaper and gives you a closer shave. I had just finished lathering up and got ready for the first stroke when Lily burst into the bathroom, yelling and waving her arms around. I was so shocked and jumped so much that I accidentally sliced up and across my face.”

Lily looks up and whistles innocently just as Sequoia leans forward and looks directly at her. “Why’d you do that?”

“Because it was funny! We prank and mess with each other all the time, and before that time, Hemlock and I

had a war of busting into the bathroom when we thought the other was using the toilet or shower to scare the hell outta each other. I truly didn't know she was shaving. That time put a permanent end to bathroom pranks."

Hemlock rubs her scar gingerly. "And began our first aid training. Nearly lost half my vision from that goof. It was pretty funny, tho."

Sequoia's expression flattens and she looks up at Hemlock. "You aren't just like... making that dumb story up to avoid talking about a tragic backstory that's too painful to talk about, are you?"

Hemlock lets loose a short burst of laughter. "The only tragic part of that accident was depriving the public of my gorgeous mug for a month!"

Sequoia slumps forward, nearly dragging her fingertips on the ground as she walks. She picks herself back up and lulls her head. "What a let down. I was hoping for a big sweeping story like that movie."

Hemlock wraps her arm around Sequoia's shoulders. "Sorry Coy. Not everything has a cool narrative arc. Most of life is just dumb accidents like that. Especially our lives."

Sequoia gets her second wind and determination fills her face. "Oh yeah? What about how you got to be so feral! You never went into that, you just waved it off! So how about it, Hemlock?"

Hemlock looks down at Sequoia and makes her eyes as big as she can. "It's a tragic backstory that's too painful to talk about."

Sequoia's visibly taken aback. "Whoa, really?"

Hemlock smiles a wolfish smile down at Sequoia. "I dunno, am I serious? Or is this another goof? OoOoOoOoOo~"

They walk in silence for a few moments before Sequoia bops Hemlock in the shoulder again. "Well?"

"I fell down one once."

"Huh? No no not like that, I mean-"

Hemlock puts her hands on the back of her head and arches her back. "That one's got a cool narrative arc. It all started on a day very much like this one, when I was talking to a younger, naive friend of mine about how I got this scar. Y'see, I was shaving next to a well-"

Sequoia wilts, hanging her head and slumping her shoulders forward. "Nevermind..."

Several moments pass, and Oak looks over at Sequoia to see her looking down at her feet as she walks. Oak searches her brain for something to say, and manages to snag something. "Hey Coy, your last name's spelt with two t's, right?"



Sequoia picks herself back up and moves to walk next to Oak. “Yeppers. P-e-double t-i-corn. Why’d you ask?”

“Well, I gotta write your name on our posters. Do you want your middle name too? What was it... Vine?”

“Virens, and you don’t gotta put that, that would be too weird I think.”

Lily’s eyes light up. “Virens... Sequoia virens... Oh right! You just reminded me! Of something I wanted to say earlier!”

Sequoia shrinks back in on herself. “Y-your eyes...”

Ignoring her, Lily lifts a finger and shuts her eyes with pride. “Did you know that the sequoia sempervirens is the only genus of sequoia, or redwood, trees in the Cupressaceae, or cypress tree, family? Tallest and oldest known organism on Earth, too. Highly unique, nothing else on Earth like 'em! Like you! Prolly why Mahog named you after 'em. If you laid one out along the largest animal in the world, balaenoptera musculus or the blue whale, it'd be three times longer!” Her eyes grow wide and she starts waving her arms. “Can you fathom that? A two thousand year old tree shooting three hundred feet straight up into the sky! That's your namesake. That's probably why you're really up here. Too tall for Hell! You could have roots stretching down for hundreds of feet and not know it.”

Sequoia laughs nervously. “O-oh? You don’t say. I guess I do have roots in Hell.”

Oak busts up. “Haha that was terrible! Maybe your first set should be during our anti-comedy act.”

Sequoia closes her eyes and smiles wide. “I would be honored to put the final nail in the coffin of comedy.” She rolls her eyes around, trying to find what she wants to ask. “I know Hemlock’s family name is Wolanson, but I don’t think I heard either of yours. Or is it the same? That’s how it works up here usually, right?”

Oak tugs at the hair covering the nape of her neck. “H-hey, we aren’t married y’know! Not that either of us would take the other’s last name if we ever did. My last name is Streamflow.”

“Mine’s Dampsoil.”

“Haha seriously?! No wonder Lily’s so into plants! It’s so fitting that the two of you are named after part of the water cycle. All we need to do is change Hemlock’s last name to Evaporation and mine to Sunbeam.”

Hemlock drops her hand on Sequoia’s head and looks down at her. “Why can’t I be Sunbeam? I’m taller than you. The sun’s higher up than mist.”

Sequoia ducks her head and moves it so Hemlock’s hand slides off. “It’s my sunny disposition. Besides, you seem like an ‘evaporation’ to me. If you don’t mind me

asking, why haven't you two gotten married? You said you're childhood sweethearts, right? Did topsider marriage customs disappear over the centuries?"

Oak shakes her head. "It's not that, altho our generation has had plummeting marriage rates. Everyday folks our age are on too much of a grind to get married and settle down anymore. For us, it was illegal until recently, considering we're both girls. Once that archaic law was struck down, we thought about it but..."

Lily throws her hands up in the air. "Who needs it? Regardless of what it was back in the day, marriage today is just getting yourself registered with the government." She shifts her hands back and forth, parallel with each other. "They put two people's names in a file they put in a cabinet and hand you a license saying in the government's eyes, you're a couple. That seems so... Gross and creepy. Like we need their permission to be together. Whatever. Why get them involved? Our love and capacity to love others is far greater than what their eyes can see. We have our own way of life, the government has theirs, and may the two never intertwine. Or at least, as little as possible. Nothing can so much as rattle the bond Oak and I have. That's better than marriage."

Oak's tail swishes around, brushing up against Sequoia and Lily's legs. The gals round a corner and head towards town center. "Some small towns and villages have marriage customs that are important to their culture, but

our hometown is pretty normal for the most part. Then there's still the religious concept of marriage, but as you can imagine, we're not very religious. Some folks have their own ceremonies without any Cecilian sect or the government, but again, why bother? It just seems so... showy, y'know? Oh, hello, Sequoia. Say, have you met my *wife*, Lily? What's it been, darling wife of mine?"

Lily sticks her nose up and places her fingertips on her breastplate. "Five years and counting, my bride. And may I say, you look as ravishing as the day we got *married*. See this ring she gave me? Ho ho ho! She saved up for a whole year to afford it! That's how you know she truly loves me! Now we're legally bonded with each other, in the eyes of Cecilia and the Chairman of the Coalition! That's how you know we're sincere about this."

Oak closes her eyes and puts on her best haughty expression. "Totally not putting on a show for this one! This isn't performative at all! Quite the opposite, it's perfectly normal and average in every way. We're respectable citizens of the Coalition, after all. Oh wifey wife?"

"Yes lovey love?" Lily asks sickeningly sweetly.

"When was the last time we had a date night? It seems like *ages* since we last courted each other."

Lily lets loose a haughty laugh. "Oh but it has! Let's see, it was-"

Hemlock wretches. “The time you made your roommate puke doing this bit. She threw up all over the place, and all over you, and you had to take a shower and then went on a date to get away from the stench. It was now that that happened by the way. It’s me, I’m the roommate. It’s bad enough you two do this on stage sometimes. Way to go, Coy.”

Sequoia mimes a hammer driving in some nails. “Thump, thump, thump. There, coffin sealed. RIP Comedy, Its Jokes Never Landed. Now that that’s done, when’s lunch?”

Oak laughs at that, and unzips her hoodie. The days are getting warmer, and the sun’s out and shining today. She puts her hands in her hoodie pockets, and turns to Sequoia. “Hey Coy, I’ve been tossing that whole explanation of what you do in my head and it just... doesn’t even put a picture in my mind.”

Sequoia thinks for a moment, goes to put her hands in her pockets before realizing they’re already there, and slouches forward. “Hm... When you cast that ritual, what did it feel like?”

Oak droops slightly. “A billion threads being unraveled then compressing into a knot that exploded.”

“Yeah, nothing like what we do. So that means topsiders found a way to do what we do somehow and messed up big time. Must be why our backlash is so small

and yours is so huge and wild. What about regular magic?”

“It’s pretty much the same as calculating the trajectory and physics of a bullet and ricochets on the fly? I don’t feel any energy or anything, I just... find the constants, find the variables, crunch the numbers, the components get consumed, and the spell goes off. Basically.”

Sequoia’s eyes shift back and forth. “Nope, not any of... what you just said. It’s just our nature. It’s like... walking? Maybe? Lemme think for a moment. ... Ok so, when you’re a baby, you can’t walk, even when your muscles and bones get strong enough. You have to be taught how to walk. But then, once you know and grow a bit more, it’s so natural that you can just do it without processing it. That still isn’t quite it... Uhm, how to explain... Take the mattress for instance. This stuff *could* be a mattress, so you just jump to the point it *is* a mattress. Between those two points, everything works itself out. That's the way of the universe. Or like cleaning myself. I am dirty, I could be clean, so skip to the part where I'm clean.” She waves dismissively. “No need for the inbetweens, let the universe figure that stuff out. I don't have to think about stuff like that, because it's so reflexive.”

“Yeah but... that doesn't explain the part with the fire. I mean, knowing it's instinctual I guess I get that, but you aren't jumping from one point to another.”

“Sure I am. You’re really not going to like this part, Oak.” Oak tilts her head at Sequoia as she continues. “So like... metaphorically, the fire was easy because I *believe* human's logic, or magic, can do that because it seems like real witchy stuff, y’know? I can just say to the universe ‘hey this is something magic can do right? And like, demons are magical in nature and used to fire, plus we made magic with humans so I can skip the whole casting magic thing right?’ Fire isn't really in our nature and we're energetic not magical, it's just what everyone up here *believes*. I don't actually know if magic works like that, I just believe it does. So I can hijack that belief and trick the universe pretty easily, and the universe is like ‘yeah, I got this, no problem’.”

Oak slumps over. “Not you too...”

Hemlock claps her hands and shakes her hips.  
“Preach it sister! Testify!”

“I’m changing the reality of whatever I’m trying to do. In the case of the fire, I’m changing the reality of its shape and ability to burn my hands. Up here, I need the universe’s help with that because reality isn’t quite as... gooey as I’m used to. The further away my intention is from its current reality, the more it takes outta me, since I gotta get the universe to do more and more for me. That sentence sucks uhm... Ok so, the reason the mattress wiped me out is because I know it can be made mundanely from what we had, but its current reality is

that it's just a buncha diffuse items. To get to the new reality of these items where they're a mattress, you can go one of two ways. The first is you gotta study how to spin cotton, cut and sew fabric, learn the physics of springs, how to cut and bend metal, take the time to actually build it, etc. That's a huge amount of steps to just skip! The other way is, since none of us have the tools or know how to make a mattress from these materials, we can't skip to the part where we build it, so I have to recognize that literally anything is possible, it's just a matter of how likely it is. The odds of that stuff just forming a mattress are so low that it's nearly indistinguishable from impossible. Nearly. So you gotta figure which one's easier on the universe and hope for the best. I went with the former, and the universe was like 'What the hell! That's a lotta work! You're gonna have to do some of *my* work if you want me to do that!' So I say 'ok sure, whatever *dad*' but I have no idea how the universe fundamentally works, so weird things happen because I can't actually do its job. So I guess the universe wanted me to make grass and flowers grow, I have absolutely no idea why and how grass and flowers grow and I was put on the spot, so I had to use up a lot of my own personal energy to make it happen. Sorta like how you burn calories through exercise. In the end, the job's done, so whatever, who cares, y'know? Time for a nap."

Lily pinches the bridge of her nose and squints her eyes. "I'm so hopelessly lost..."



Oak lulls her head to the side a bit. "So... you know how to make a mattress now?"

Sequoia shakes her head. "Nope. The universe did all that stuff, so now the universe knows how to make mattresses. Again, metaphorically speaking. None of that is actually happening, and I'm not actually doing any of that, it's just the most relatable I can make it to topsiders."

Lily rocks her head back and makes a face. "THAT'S relatable?!"

Hemlock looks down at Sequoia. "No offense Coy but that sounds kinda irresponsible."

Sequoia just smiles. "None taken. Kinda makes me happy, honestly. We were originally mischievous little shits. Do you think 'responsible' when you think of trickster sprites? No. That's the whole problem with Hell and everyone in it, responsibility is sooo important to everyone. I try to be as we were and say fuck it to responsibility, but everyone's all 'Sequoia stop sleeping in class, Sequoia stop making the professor smell like a nightmare, Sequoia stop interrupting the lecture with the phrase 'too long, didn't listen' in giant burning letters hovering in midair, Sequoia stop making rooms with two doors loop infinitely when you try to leave them.' Whatever. The universe isn't so fragile it can't do some of the heavy lifting. Just like the fabric of Hell won't be torn asunder because one lil asshole remembered pranks are

in our nature. But don't worry, I'll still do my fair share of chores and stuff. Just don't be surprised or upset when I leave it up to the universe to get the job done."

Hemlock smiles broadly and looks forward. "No arguments here. All I care about is that they're done. The inbetweens don't matter."

Sequoia wraps her arm around Hemlock and squeezes. "See?! You get it, Hemlock! I knew you were wiser than you act."

Hemlock looks down at Oak and gives her a big goofy smile. "Hey Oak, didja hear that? She said-"

Oak's expression goes flat. "Yes I heard what she said."

Sequoia folds her arms across her chest. "Theoretically, I should be able to just do whatever through sheer will alone. When my people first came here, we used the connection between our realm and this one to do basically anything. Reality was ours to play with like clay. I'm not entirely certain why it's different for me. Maybe I just need to practice more and Mahog's story is missing a lot of parts. That's about as likely as anything else. They prefer to talk in stories. They're kinda like us like that? In reality, all things must have a cost. Maybe it was like this way back when we first came here and Mahog thought it didn't make a good story." Sequoia puts her hands behind her head and tilts her head to the sky. "Whatever the cause, it doesn't matter much to me.

Worrying about stuff like that is for ambitious people and I have zero drive to do anything but harmless, weird pranks and cool stuff for our shows. If it's funny and doesn't hurt anyone, or get me in trouble, sure, I might do something, if I feel like it. If I get to do stuff without it taking so much outta me, cool. If not, whatever. Actively practicing is too much work. I kinda want to just lay down in the current of life and let it take me wherever it goes. So far that's led me to the three of you and the happiest... less than twenty four hours of my life."

Lily half closes her eyes and a weird smile spreads across her face. "Aw Coy Coy you're so sweeeeeeeeeet! Gonna conjure up a big mountain of sugar next?"

Sequoia brings her head back down and stuffs her hands in her pockets again. "Huh? Hey, c'mon now."

Lily grabs Sequoia's cheek and starts tugging gently, still smiling that weird, creepy smile. "Coy Coy getting eeeeverything sticky with her syrupy sweet words!"

Sequoia squints her eyes shut and waves her hands in front of her. "Stoooooop!"

Lily lets go and snickers. "Hehe. Welcome to the troupe, pal. Feel free to step in whenever."

The gals round another corner, and finally reach town square. It has a fountain in the center of it, and several shops lined all around. Various guildhouses make their

home in the square. Oak walks up to a utility pole with dozens of worn out advertisements for shows and parties long since past. She gets out the stapler and a poster from the backpack, leaving it unzipped. "This looks like a great spot." Kachunk, kachunk, kachunk, kachunk. She pulls a marker out of her pocket and scribbles on the poster. "And done. Check it out."

Sequoia examines the poster. It has a drawing of Oak making a sneaky pose looking behind her, Lily on her knees and clutching a flower in a praying position, and Hemlock's head only drawn with a beard glowering down at the two of them, with the name of the play and everyone's name on it. Sequoia's name is scribbled on above the other three's. She turns to Oak, her eyes wide. "You *drew* this? And you're just hanging it on a post outside where it'll get messed up? This looks great, Oak!"

Oak rubs the back of her neck and smiles. "Yeah? Thanks, I'm real proud of it. I work hard on these things and keep the original of each poster I make in a portfolio in the van. This one's just a copy, so it's cool if it gets rained on and stuff. If you wanna see them later, I can show you."

"Hell yeah, dude."

Lily gets a teasing smile on her face. "What's this? Did Oak just take a compliment? Are we sure she wasn't kidnapped and replaced with a double when we weren't looking?"

Oak laughs. "Hey now, it had to start sometime?" She surveys the local area. "Hm... where else... Town square is the ideal place to put a buncha these..."

Hemlock's wolfish smile returns, and she folds her arms over her chest. "I know where."

"Oh? ... Oh no. No no no."

"Oh yes. Smack dab on the side of the Crossguard Guild."

Lily's own devious smile splits her face. "I love it. Great thinking, Lock."

Oak looks around nervously. "Dude, no! They'll come out and-"

Hemlock waves it off. "And what, yell at us? Whatever. They're gonna do that anyways, so let's have some fun."

Sequoia taps her foot and puts her hands on her hips. "Hey, can you just tell me who these guys are already. It's getting a lil annoying being left out of the loop."

Oak tugs on the flop of hair over her eye. "Sorry about that. They're just... terrifying. We don't like talking about them because we're... sorta the kinda unsavory folks they target a lot, even when we're doing nothing wrong. At its heart, it's a mercenary guild. They call themselves adventurers, detectives, and peacekeepers, and they're

picky about what jobs they take, but those are just fancy ways of saying they'll take on dangerous jobs for pay."

"Isn't that what the three of you do with the Loser Board?"

Hemlock tip toes behind Oak and slowly slips a poster and the stapler out of the backpack, careful not to alert Oak. She puts a finger to her lips and sneaks away. Oak gesticulates as she talks. "Sorta, but I haven't gotten to the rest of it. The Loser Board is basically focused on hyper local problems. Extremely small world stuff, usually directly helping the needy. The Crossguards tho... Their bread and butter is big world stuff. It's like the Loser Board in a way, except instead of useful things to people it's stuff you'd normally go to the police for. Missing people, stolen items, investigating a crime scene, stuff like that, and they're elite warriors used to settle big world emergencies. Typically, they can't get involved in governmental matters, but in some cases, they can even interfere with matters of the state." She shrugs and tilts her head. "Which we don't really care about because the government is stupid and so is caring about it outside of knowing how to not get fucked over by it. Their members are also enormously powerful and skilled. It's... it's really freaky. The only person we know who could stand toe to toe with them is Lily's mom."

Lily folds her arms in front of her and sticks her nose up in the air. "Stand toe to toe nothing, she'd crush those

creeps into the mat and help them up after. Then challenge them to another round.”

“It’s actually pretty weird. There’s not much of a need for warriors anymore, so the whole guild is pretty... anachronistic. From what I understand, their membership has been in stasis for the past ten years. Why pay the exorbitant fees of the Crossguards when you can just go to the growing police force? Why become a Crossguard when the KnoCs are far more relevant? Who knows how they stay in business? I think they’re funded by the government just in case of global emergencies. The only real limit to their jurisdiction is Arclight which no one even considers part of the world anyway. They’re incredibly strong, and they hone their skills by killing monsters. They’re essentially the total antithesis of us. And everyone loves them because Sunflower literally saved the world awhile back.”

“I take it they’re one of them?”

Lily groans as she slumps her shoulders forward. “Yeah. She’s their ace member and harrasses us whenever we’re in town. Everyone’s a lil fuzzy on the details because big world stuff like that is privileged information, but *supposedly* there was a powerful reality ritual user on the Rainsoaked continent who was changing small countries over there to suit their needs. No clue about their name, appearance, or anything. All these countries being turned

into some sort of weird unreality so they could bring something into our world.”

“Something?” Sequoia’s eyes track Hemlock as she sneaks back to the gang and stands close behind Oak.

Lily puffs the hair out of her eyes. “Who knows. That’s what’s in the papers. There’s some newspaper archives at the library if you wanna know more about that stuff. Anyways, point being, Sunflower somehow reached this person, killed them, and used the rituals to erase what that dude had done. Don’t even ask us how, it’s real freaky to even think about. Everyone’s all ‘she’s so talented and brave and strong and beautiful, of course she had no problem fixing everything perfectly at the tender age of sixteen! It’s not scary at all that she literally rewrote the whole world’s reality! No way she fucked anything up, she’s soooo coooool! Have our kids, Sunflower!’ pfft, whatever. That was ten years ago. We were all barely teenagers when it happened, so we never really knew what was going on, just that there was a weird feeling in the air and the world felt like it was going mad. That’s why everyone falls to their knees in front of her except losers like us. Nowadays she’s settled back into the life of an everyday freakishly powerful Crossguard that harrasses punks like us out of sheer boredom. Guess saving the world makes everything else lose its savor. I dunno if any of that stuff is even really true honestly, it seems kinda made up and hokey. Something you see in a z-grade



fantasy novel or something. I think some countries over there were amping up for a major global offensive and Sunflower assassinated the belligerents or something.”

Sequoia’s finger instinctively finds her chin, and she rolls her eyes around, surveying the scene before settling on up. “But if that’s true, why the elaborate and weird fiction? And wouldn’t those KnoCs have stopped them before they could do too much? After all, you said they came after the three of you the same day and you didn’t do anything even remotely as scary as that.”

Oak waves her hands in front of her. “The KnoCs were formed after all that, ‘to keep it from happening again OoOoOo~’.” She puts her hands back in her hoodie pockets and rocks on her heels. “We believe it’s all a hoax because the possibility of global war is way scarier than that story. War is horrific and brutal and entirely changes culture. It’s very *real* and visceral, something all of us can easily grasp and imagine and *feel*. You get some idiot vaporizing countries halfway across the world and the papers say we’re next, there’s nothing you can do and nowhere you can run. You can’t hold an image of it in your head, it’s too... alien. People accept it, and go about their lives. Industry and society remains intact. But war causes panic and flight because it’s so real and relatable.” Oak looks down at her shoes and talks into her chest. “We remember what we read and were taught about the Arclight war, about their freakishly powerful technology,

and paranoia grips our hearts even tighter. That hokey reality thing is way less scary and has more of a narrative arc. It creates villains and heroes, which is a romantic notion that people love.” Oak shrugs it off. “I mean, we’re actors, I get it. What do four nomadic idiot losers living in a van know anyway. Who cares about that stuff. There’s too much of the world to see and learn about and love to worry about stuff you can’t control.”

Sequoia tries to avoid looking at Hemlock. She smiles at Oak instead. “Y’know, I really love this. I ask a simple question, and I get this big cool story and unusual perspective on the world. It’s even better in front of a campfire, but this is good too. Everything’s a story to you folks. It’s... comforting. The three of you really are good storytellers.”

Oak rubs the back of her neck. “Haha, thanks I guess? We just jabber on and on about stuff because our brains are on fire twenty-four seven. It’s only a matter of time til your brain catches on fire too.”

Hemlock drops her hand on Oak’s shoulder with a heavy thud and grips it tight. “YER UNDER ARREST KID! PUTCHYER HANDS WHERE I CAN SEE ‘EM!”

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!” Oak jumps so high she clears Hemlock’s head. The hair on her head and fur on her tail puff out and she starts panting heavily. Hemlock roars with laughter.

Sequoia doubles over laughing and points at Hemlock. “Hahaha damn! I was waiting and waiting for you to do that! You took so long I nearly gave it away!”

Hemlock barely manages to speak between laughs. She bends backwards, putting her hand on her forehead. “Priceless! Absolutely priceless! You jumped so high! If it wasn’t so funny I’d be disappointed it was so easy!”

Lily snickers. “Want some help smoothing out your tail, babe?”

Oak pats down her hair and smooths her tail between her hands. “Th... that was mean! That was dirty! Right after that big story about paranoia and those monsters in the guild, too! There goes one of my lives.”

Hemlock reaches down and pets between Oak’s ears. “Ah, it was funny and you know it. Sorry to give you such a scare, girly.”

Oak manages a weak smile and puts her hand over her heart. “Yeah, it kinda was. My heart’s still pounding too fast for my brain to catch up. Anyways, no, we’re not putting a poster on the goddamn Crossguard guildhouse. Let’s ask a manager at the grocery store if we can hang one up on their community board. Maybe Terry’s working, he always says yes.”

“Whaddya mean? I stuck one on their wall while you three knuckleheads were jabbering away about boring shit.”

Oak’s eyes grow wide with terror. “No way. You’re bluffing.”

Hemlock folds her arms and grins. “Why don’t you count them if you don’t believe me?”

Oak pulls the posters from her backpack and flips through them. “Seven... Eight... Oh shit you’re not bluffing.”

Hemlock starts heading towards the grocery store and talks over her shoulder. “Told you. Anyway, we should probably beat feet before one of them notices. It’s only a good gag if we don’t get a citation for it.”

The gals talk to a manager at the grocery store and tack a poster to the community board by the checkouts. They head south towards the docks, and hang one on a community board filled with notices, tear away phone numbers for guitar lessons, Loser Board jobs, and the like. They head further down and come across the parts shop. Lily puts her hand on the handle and leans into the door. “Hang tight gals, this won’t take long.” Everyone follows Lily in as she walks up to the counter and starts conversing with the clerk.

Sequoia tilts her head. “Why’d she go off on her own?”

Hemlock nods at Lily. “She’s sparing us. Literally. She knows we’ll be bored and confused and we’re better off having a seat while she does business. If you thought her rambling about plants was bad, you should listen in on her machine talk.”

Oak hangs her head and sighs. “I can at least follow along when she’s talking about scientific classifications, but this is totally incomprehensible to me. She’s even worse when we visit her parents. Her old man’s a mechanic and runs a garage and repair shop back in our hometown. I’ve never seen a machine Lily couldn’t fix, eventually, but... her dad’s basically a machine thaumaturgist. You could give him a cog and a piece of twisted, burnt out wreckage and he’d give you back a wind-up toy in fifteen minutes flat. Taught her everything she knows about machines, and they jabber like musicians going over how to play a song.”

Sequoia perks her ears and listens close. “Is... Is she speaking another language? I lost track after ‘hi there’.”

“Might as well be for us. This is how she feels when I talk about magic.”

Sequoia sits down in a chair in the lobby and leans back. “It seems really weird that her dad’s a mechanic and her mom’s an ex-monk martial artist. How does that even happen? Do they like... have the mayor draw names out of a hat?”

Oak takes a seat next to her and leans against Sequoia and laughs. “That’d probably make more sense! Her mom wanted a training dummy that fought back. She kept breaking all the wooden dummies and punching bags she used to keep up on her skills, and her pupils were too green to give her any challenge. So she went to Zevon’s garage to hammer out what she wanted and the cost to make something like that. The way Lily tells it, ol’ Zevon, that’s her dad, thought about her request, then agreed to do it for free if she would go on a date with him. That’s probably the first and only time he had anyone actually agree to it. He ah... Is kind of a scoundrel like Hemlock? Even though they’re still married, he shamelessly flirts with any and every woman that goes to his garage. I don’t think I’ll ever forget the look on Hemlock’s face when he flirted with her for the first time.”

Hemlock shakes her head. “Don’t even *compare* me to that old fool. It ain’t like that stuff bothers me, I can handle guys flirting with me, but when it’s one of my best friends’ dad, and in front of Lily’s mom and she don’t even say anything... There’s only so much my idiot brain can take before it shuts down completely.”

Sequoia laughs. “Seriously? I can’t wait to meet this old coot! How does her mom put up with it?”

Oak merely shrugs and puts her head on Sequoia’s shoulder. “That’s just how she is. He could probably go on a date with another woman and she wouldn’t care. Not

like anyone else would date him. Grease and oil smell aren't exactly alluring. Birch, that's Lily's mom, is a real focused but calm person that views life like a river and goes with the flow. You'll probably get on well with her. So she agreed to go on a date with him, and she found him charming and funny and he kinda is, in his weird way, and he kept putting off the machine dummy and asking for another date... And another... And after that went on for a while, he gave her the machine dummy and it rolled forward and presented her with a ring and asked if she would marry him. Zevon, not the dummy. She thought that was about the sweetest thing, agreed, and they got hitched. They do love each other, they just... love the things they're passionate about just as much. Zevon'll spend days in the garage tinkering and building, and Birch will spend just as much time practicing, sparring, and training her students. Then they'll spend a week being a normal loving couple before repeating the cycle. She doesn't care about the flirting because she knows it's just a harmless old man having fun. He doesn't care about her outwardly muted emotions because he knows how kind she is. Weirdest couple we've ever seen."

Sequoia scratches between Oak's ears and leans her head against hers. "Now I'm real eager to see your hometown. That sounds like exactly the type of genuine and sincere weird sweetness I've been hoping for up here. No wonder Lily's so goofy. So what about your folks?"

“They’re ah... real traditional and old fashioned. My dad, Stephen, is an accountant, and my mom, Ficus, stays at home and cleans and cooks. They send a curt card and a token amount of money to a PO box here in Feymist for holidays, and we never see each other. We only started doing shows in Yama about five years ago, after... y’know. Before that, we only stopped by while on the way to somewhere else so we could see Lily’s folks. They’re just about the sweetest and most accepting folks. They’ve all but officially adopted me. I spent more time at Lily’s place than I did at home basically my whole childhood. Zevon keeps asking me when we’ll get hitched and give him a litter of grandkittens. I think that’s where Lily gets her open and loving personality from. Like her parents, she really genuinely does love everyone as they are. ...Well, maybe just... coexist with Sunflower.”

“But wouldn’t your parents see your posters around town when you’re doing a show?”

“The posters are probably just more background noise to them. Like I said, they’re real traditional and conservative. They don’t really ‘get’ art, so stuff like that is a bother on the way to where they’re going. It’s why it was rough when I came out when I was fifteen and told them my dream of being a vagabond actor, they don’t understand romanticism or art or that dreams can be a reality if you push hard enough. And y’know, the other stuff didn’t exactly go down well either. They believe in



security and stability, which necessarily go hand in hand with conformity. That's fine for some folks, just not us. That's why Lily and I kinda sorta ran away with her parents' blessing. Her mom was so proud actually. She had done something similar when she was a teenager, leaving the monastery to walk from place to place, learning new cultures, new techniques, sharing stories with strangers, helping folks along the way... Probably where we get it from. She never set foot in an inn or even so much as hitchhiked or touched money for ten years, trading her skills for shelter and food. We ah... really look up to her? The most incredible person we've ever known. Not to put down her pops, who's real funny and friendly and frankly brilliant, but... Birch is an inspiration."

Sequoia laughs, jostling their heads. "What am I doing with the three of you when I could be studying under a living legend? Especially when you're so bad at deflection."

Hemlock leans against the wall and folds her arms in front of her. "Hey, if you wanna deal with the old man's advances twenty-four seven and spend nearly every waking moment getting punched, be my guest."

Oak shakes her head gently, so as to not disturb Sequoia. "I'm starting to get you're undistractable. Is a laser focused attention span a major in Hell's universities? There's not really much more to say. They wouldn't recognize me even if they saw the posters. Recognize my

name, maybe, if they can remember it for once. I only tried to reconnect with my folks about a year after we left, when I set up the PO box. Took another year for them to respond. I'm grateful to them for giving me life and raising me. That's not easy, y'know, you gotta feel love for someone to go through that, even if you suck at showing it. They're not bad people, they just don't understand me or my way of life, just like I don't understand them and their way of life. We love each other in our distant, kid gloves way, but it's like ships passing in the night."

Lily peels herself away from the counter, carrying a few small boxes. "Sorry that took a bit. You just get into a groove, y'know? Whatcha talking about?" and Lily bends down and puts the boxes in the backpack on the ground and zips it up.

Hemlock down at Lily. "How creepy and gross your old man is." She grunts as she pushes herself off of the wall.

"Yeah, that's pretty much him in a nutshell. But he's totally harmless, Coy. When you meet him, please don't freak out. He's just trying to get a reaction out of you."

Sequoia sits up and stretches out her arms and legs. "He actually sounds real sweet and cool? You shouldn't care about societal expectations, but especially when you're old. That's exactly the time when you should do

whatever you want and have fun. I was telling them how much I wanna meet your folks.”

Lily hefts the backpack up and slips it onto her back. “We plan on going there in about six weeks. There’s a festival we really get into at the end of April and the nights will still be cold enough to enjoy the hot springs. Actually, you’ll probably feel right at home with that gross intense sulfur smell.” and sticks her tongue out at Sequoia.

Sequoia reciprocates. “So what happened with that mechanical training dummy anyways? It just sorta dropped outta the story suddenly.”

They all start walking to the entrance and Lily puts her hand on the shop door’s handle. “They told you that embarrassing old story? Can’t believe my mom was sucked in by such a corny gesture. That old thing was a smoldering ruin long before I was born. Mom never had much sentimentality for objects. Anyways, ready to head out?”

“I was ready the moment you began speaking in tongues. Let’s mosey.”

Lily pulls the door open, and steps out into a scene of chaos. Workers are scrambling and screaming, fleeing north to town square. A roar can be heard in the distance. Hemlock steps in front of someone fleeing and grabs them by the shoulders. “Hey buddy, what’s going on?”

“M-monster! Came up with the dredger and yanked half of it right into the sea! Ain’t seen anything like it! If you got sense in your head, you’ll run!” and they wriggle out of Hemlock’s grasp and continue running. A few screams come from the direction of the dock.

Hemlock looks like she’s ready to bolt. “There’s still people over there! We should-”

Lily grabs her arm. “Let the Crossguards handle this! If it pulled down the dredger, we don’t have a prayer! We’re *actors* Lock, we don’t have any business there! If anything, we’ll make it worse! Besides, you left your axe back at the van, remember? What’re we gonna do, huh?”

“And if the Crossguards are too late for those folks like they so often are? Help others whenever, however we can, remember? We can go down, assess, and see if there’s something we can do.”

Lily throws her hands up. “Yeah... Fuck, fine. But if it’s too much, we’re bailing. I’m not ready to beef it here just yet.”

“Deal.” And Hemlock takes off, Lily in close pursuit. Oak gives Sequoia a worried look and shrugs, and both of them trail behind the other two. They all arrive on the scene and a giant sea serpent is writhing on the dredger’s hook, snapping at some dock workers hiding behind boxes, crashing its tail around the dock and smashing crates.

“Yep, we’re bailing.”

Hemlock grabs Lily’s arm and points at the dredger. “All we need to do is find some way to unhook it! Then it’ll just fall in the water and head back out to sea!”

Sequoia shrugs. “I got it.” The hook starts to work itself loose and crashes into the sea with the monster. Hemlock dashes in and grabs the workers by the collars and drags them away from the dock. The beast roars and pops back up, its head barely peeking up over the dock, and snaps at them. “Uhm. Maybe I can-” She doesn’t have time to so much as finish that thought when the pitter patter of boots comes running from the north. Sequoia turns, jams a hand in her pocket and points at the figure running at them. “That one of your Crossguards?”

“Ah hell.” Lily turns and waves her hands in the universal motion for stop. “No, wait, Sunflower! It’s just scared and-”

A blur of black, green, and pink rushes past them, leaping high into the air, spinning, before crashing down on the serpent’s head with a sword. The monster doesn’t even roar or thrash, its head simply crashes against the dock and it slips down beneath the waves just after the figure kicks off its head and flips onto the dock. She whips the blood off her sword with one smooth motion and sheathes it before balling up her fists and heading directly for Lily.

Lily puts her hand on her forehead and hangs her head. “-heading home. Like we shoulda done.”

The woman with the sword stops in front of the gals and glowers at them. This gal. How does she keep from chopping off that long flowing pink hair swinging her sword around like that? That sword’s even longer than her hair, it doesn’t make sense, even moreso when it doesn’t seem like she wears any armor to keep from nicking herself with that sword. Top to bottom, she looks like she means business, with her olive green military style jacket totally unmarred, her gray undershirt utterly lacking even a drop of blood despite or perhaps because of the maneuver she just pulled, and her black tactical pants draped over the neck of her combat boots. Her deep brown eyes look very, very tired. She crosses her arms in front of her and shakes her head. “I heard the circus was in town, and lo and behold, the clowns are right in the middle of chaos. Again. Typical. What’s the matter, couldn’t finish the job? Pathetic.”

Lily shakes her head sadly. “Sunflower, how could you do that so... callously? That poor animal was snagged by the dredger and was just scared. We unhooked it and were about to chase it off, everything was fine. Do you just have zero empathy for anything?”

Sunflower scoffs. “As if you would understand the true meaning of empathy. Listen up, bozos. That ‘poor animal’ had the taste of blood on its tongue. If a monster knows

there's food, it'll return. This is why you need to stay out of the Crossguards' way. If I hadn't been here, that monster would have continued to attack this dock until someone put it out of its misery. Your willful blindness to the realities of this world and misguided 'good will' will end up costing good people their lives, and I don't cotton to that. *This* is why you should stay in your big top."

Sequoia walks towards the dredger's ruin, seemingly unnoticed by Sunflower, her ire so focused on the three clowns she's come to recognize over the years. She points at a small piece of the wreckage all twisted up on the ground and addresses a worker cowering behind some crates. "Hey buddy, do you need this wrecked up metal?"

"Uhm?"

Hemlock stomps towards Sunflower and stops two arms' length away and folds her arms, staring her down. "You know as well as we do that if a wild animal knows that a place is dangerous, it'll avoid it. Do you think it liked being snagged by the dredger? Do you see any chewed up people? Any blood but the shit you whipped onto the dock? Look!" Hemlock gestures to some workers who are coming out of their hiding spots. "You would've had a point if we hadn't come here! Your idiot guild's always too late!"

Sequoia picks up the piece of metal. “Cool, thanks. Uhm, you wouldn’t happen to have a snack on you, would you?”

“Uh...”

Oak hides behind Hemlock and peeks her head out from around her side. “W-we don’t really want any trouble, Sunflower. Ma’am. We just... I mean we wan... We were just doing what we knew in our hearts was the right thing, y’know? Th-that’s all we ever do. We even said that we were just distracting it long enough for one of you to arrive. It’s uhm. A good thing it was you. Ma’am. The workers are fine, we’re fine, you saved the day, let’s just call it a wash, ok?”

Sunflower shakes her head slowly. “You hear that, you two? The only one of you who has any brains at all is the witch who couldn’t even get a transfiguration ritual right and even she can’t see why you three are a menace. Doing what you knew was right in your heart? Maybe you should think with your Goddess given brain instead. Or is it as rotten as the trash you dig your books out of?”

Sequoia looks at the piece of metal and turns back towards the others. “Nevermind, I’ll manage.” The metal starts twisting and reforming into the shape of a sunflower. A popping noise is heard, and an eye opens up on the floor of the dock, looks around and closes up as if it was never there. Sequoia looks back over her shoulder at



the dock worker. "Gross. You should maybe replace that board. Sorry about that."

Lily gets between Hemlock and Sunflower and gets in an attack stance. "Back off, psycho. I won't let you talk to my girl like that."

Sunflower laughs a hollow, mirthless laugh. "Or what, you'll call your mommy? You're no Birch, shrimp. Stand down before I put you down. Or maybe that's exactly the medicine you need to wake you up."

Hemlock moves between Lily and Sunflower, getting dangerously close to her. She puts a hand on Lily's shoulder and eases her up. "I honestly don't give a damn about you or the guild. We don't want a tussle, we just want you to leave us the fuck alone! You charge in here, stabbing monsters like it's a normal goddamn thing to do, then insult us for saving lives? I'll take a rotten brain over a cold heart any day. If you're such a bigshot, what're you doing wasting time with a buncha idiot losers like us?" Hemlock's signature wolfish grin slowly spreads across her face. "When you could be using that sword of yours to scrape off the poster I plastered on your shitheap guild's wall."

Sunflower's eyes grow wide, then harden again. "Ha. A coward's bluff. You don't have the guts to so much as *spit* on the guild's wall."

Sequoia reaches the gang again, and stands off to the side. She looks up at Sunflower and smiles. “Excuse me, Miss Sunflower?”

Hemlock verbally charges forward. “Oh yes I do. If you hurry, you can get to it before the plaster sets in. Might wanna run, we can only afford the shitty stuff that stains the walls. At least it’ll match the interior.”

Sequoia rolls her eyes and raises her voice. “Heyyyy Sunflower.”

Sunflower’s expression darkens. “You oaf!”

Hemlock makes a kissy face at Sunflower. “Love ya too, bitch.”

Sequoia stamps her feet and raises her voice higher. “Sunflower!”

Sunflower balls up her fists and raises them skyward. “THAT DOES IT! It’s time I give you clowns a reality check!” Sunflower gets into an attack stance and starts to rush towards Hemlock.

Sequoia balls up her fists and yells at the top of her lungs. “YO SUNNY! COOL YOUR JETS FOR A SEC!” Sunflower stops dead in her tracks, noticing Sequoia seemingly for the first time. Her eyes run up and down her and her expression goes from pure rage to pure horror. Sequoia just wipes her brow and smiles. “Phew. Sorry for yelling, but it was the only way I could get your attention.

Uhm. Here?" and she holds out the metal sunflower she just made from the dredger's ruin. "It's a peace offering. I uhm, made it from the dredger's wreckage? I'm offering a piece of wreckage for peace ha ha, uhm. It's uhm, a sunflower, get it? Like you? Only made out of garbage metal." She nervously rubs the back of her neck and laughs. "Sorry, it's all I had to work with! I'll try to have something better with me next time, promise. It's still kinda pretty, tho, in its way, and the metal didn't go to waste. We bear you no ill will, we simply wanted to watch the boats come in. I've never seen that before, and thought it'd be pretty fun. Too bad about the rest of it. So it goes, right? We were just in the right place at the wrong time."

Sunflower mutters incoherently to herself, her composure totally ruined. Her hand creeps slowly to her sword's hilt.

"Oh right, I should introduce myself. Uhm, sorry, still getting used to topsider customs. My name's Sequoia, Sequoia Petticorn, but my friends which uhm so far are just these three, call me Coy. Uhm. Haha cuz seh-coy-ah get it? Seck and Oya don't have the same uhm. Ring to them. Uhm. You can call me that too if you like. I ah... like it. Or, y'know, uhm... Sequoia's good too. Whatever." She shrugs and glances at the sunflower she made, laughing nervously. "I gathered you're Sunflower. I think Sunny's kinda cute, but I can just use Sunflower instead. Uhm. If

you prefer that.” Sequoia’s eyes dart back and forth between Sunflower and the metal sunflower. “Oh, don’t worry, it’s totally mundane. No weird hexes or goofs or anything. No tricks, I just want to put this behind us so we can enjoy the rest of our day. I’ll even take care of the poster on the guild wall. If uhm. You want. Hemlock was just joking anyways, it’s only stapled on. So how about it? Friends? Or at least ‘let’s let bygones be bygones instead of turning this into a bloodbath’ acquaintances? Uhm, it’s not that my arm’s getting tired but uhm. The look in your eyes is kinda intense and uhm. Making me feel like I’m about to wig out. So c’mon, accept my peace offering and let’s move on?” Sequoia gulps and her eyes dart faster. “Or at least tell me you don’t want it so I can stop looking silly and let us get on with our day. Uhm.” Sequoia slumps forward and lowers her arm. “Ok, you got me, my arm is getting a little tired.”

Sunflower grips her sword’s hilt tightly, her voice barely above a whisper. “What have the three of you done.”

Oak starts waving her arms around aimlessly. “Nothing! Lis-”

Sunflower’s composure and voice slowly come back to her as she stares down Sequoia. “You’ve stepped into a world you cannot possibly comprehend. How did you remove its binds? How is it *solid!* Who taught you how to do this!”

Hemlock and Lily tense up, Oak becomes a barely coherent stuttering mess. “Y-y-you have it all wrong! Please, listen! She’s just-”

Sunflower grits her teeth and unsheathes her sword. “It doesn’t matter. I’m ending this before it begins!” She lunges forward, Hemlock and Lily running seemingly in slow motion compared to the trained warrior rushing at Sequoia. Oak covers her eyes and screams at the top of her lungs. The sword slips from Sunflower’s hand and an up-slide whistle sound is heard as it rises to the sky. Sequoia steps to the side and Sunflower flies past her, rolls into a ball, and leaps to her feet. The other two stop dead in their tracks, look up at the sword, shock on their faces. Oak peeks out from behind her hand and stops screaming.

Sequoia whistles and plasters an extremely smug, self-satisfied expression on her face. She stuffs her hands in her pockets and rocks on her heels. “Whoops, there goes your sword. I wanted to make peace but this is fun too. I hope it’s not some kind of weapon of legend or anything.”

Sunflower looks stunned. She looks up at her sword and back down to Sequoia, her face a mask of anger. “Wh-what? Was that nervousness just an act?”

“Hehe. Sure was.” Sequoia examines her fingernails. “Seems like you’re ready to play nice now, tho. I guess you

can have your sword back.” A down-slide whistle sound plays, and the sword lowers to eye level between Sunflower and Sequoia.

Sunflower smiles humorlessly. “Hmph. Fool. You’ve just sealed your f-” and before she can grab it, the sword rises again, again with an up-slide whistle sound.

Sequoia laughs. “Oh no, there it goes again, Sunny. You should keep better track of your stuff. Aren’t you hero types supposed to be responsible?”

“You will address me by my full name, demon! Not that you’ll live long enough to do so!” Sunflower runs at a wall, kicks up it, and leaps high into the air to snatch the sword. Another up-slide whistle sound, and it rises out of her reach. Sunflower does a sick landing maneuver and faces Sequoia again, her face red and seething. The other three start laughing.

“Haha keep up! You’re letting yourself get punked by some demon who’s failing her classes? Maybe that story about you saving the world really was a hoax.”

“H-hoax?!” The sword lowers back down with a down-slide whistle sound, and Sunflower goes to grab the sword, which rises out of her grasp. She reaches up again, and it rises beyond her reach. Sunflower moves so fast her hand is just a blur, but the sword rises out of her grasp again, and again, until Sunflower is leaping up and flailing her arms trying to grab it. Finally, the sword rises skyward

once again, a slide whistle sound effect following all of these motions. Hemlock falls over laughing, Oak and Lily leaning against each other gasping for air.

“The clowns are aaaaaaaaall laughing at you, hero. Y’know, we have a couch you can crash on if you wanna join the troupe. This’d make a pretty good bit.” Sequoia’s smug grin spreads even wider. “If you’re nice we’ll let you snuggle up with us on the bed.”

Sunflower balls up her fists. “My sword doesn’t need to drink your blood! A warrior needs only her fists!” She charges towards Sequoia, when a popping noise is heard and a board from the dock rises up and smacks Sunflower in the face. She’s dazed, and shakes her head before charging again, this time being thwacked with a board even harder. She’s knocked flat on her back, lulling her head around. Oak falls on Hemlock and points at Sunflower, nearly hysterical with laughter. Lily puts her hands on her knees and doubles over, heaving.

Sequoia doesn’t take her eyes off Sunflower. “You hear that, Lil? Her sword’s thirsty. Sounds like it could use a drink. Ready?”

Lily stands up and jogs in place for a sec. “Go!” and she dashes towards the wall and kicks up it. The sword lowers to her reach, and Lily grabs it, flinging it into the sea. She lands roughly and starts laughing again, pointing

at Sunflower lying on the ground. “Haha you... You... you may w... Enough Coy, I can’t breathe!”

“Then we better get going. S’long, Sunny.” Sequoia does a mock salute and waves it off her forehead. “Enjoy your swim. The water’s pretty chilly this time of year, so you should strip down if you don’t wanna catch a cold.” She walks over to the others and wraps her arms around Oak and Hemlock. “Let’s blow, gals. We can see the boats another day. Or maybe at sunset! That’ll probably be even prettier.” Lily catches up with the others, and wraps her arm around Oak’s side, the four of them blocking the sidewalk as they head north.

Sunflower props herself up on her elbows and scowls after the gals. “This isn’t over, demon. Not by a long shot.”

Sequoia drops her arms and stops walking. She rubs the back of her neck and the others stop and turn to her. “... .. Hey uhm, the three of you go on ahead. I’ll catch up in a minute.”

Hemlock folds her arms. “Oh? Is everything ok?”

“I think I took things a little too far. I just want to have a talk with my new friend and patch things up. I hope she forgives me. Less than twenty-four hours and I’m already making new friends! I think I’m starting to get the hang of being up here!” Sequoia slips her hands in her pockets and smiles. “It’ll be ok. Trust me.”



Oak's expression dims to one of concern. "But-"

Hemlock scratches between Oak's ears and wraps her arm around her shoulders. "Well... if you're sure... C'mon, kitty. You heard the lady. Besides, we got the dough. She has to catch up if she wants to eat. So stop worrying all the damn time, Oak. You'll wear a path in your brain."

Lily closes her eyes and smiles. "You can do it, Coy. Thanks for taking care of that for us. We won't be so sore next time, promise. Tell your friend for us, ok?" She wraps her arm around Oak's back, rubbing her far side. "C'mon babe. Let's stop by the repair and parts store on the way to the square. I bet that clerk will let us hang up a poster, and we can wait for her by the south gate."

"Ok... But only if I go to the counter with you! I don't want to keep Coy waiting a second time because of your machine speak!"

"Deal."

The three of them walk north, Hemlock waving her free arm and turning to the others. "I'm gonna order the kraut and garlicky onion currywurst platter." The other two just say "ewwwwww!" in response. Soon, they're out of earshot of the two gals left on the dock.

Sunflower stands up, slightly unsteady on her feet. "Did you come here to gloat? Or to finish me off? It'll take

stronger words and greater power than you can muster to do either.”

Sequoia gets a pained expression on her face and rocks on her heels. “Nah, nothing like that. Listen, I really did mean what I said earlier. I still wanna forgive and forget and be friends. The nervousness, sure, that was an act, but only because I thought it’d de-escalate things better than anything else. My words were still sincere. Just like they are now. All that with the sword just now?” She shrugs. “That was just a goof. Those three needed their spirits lifted and I kinda took things too far. I’m really sorry, Sunflower. I didn’t mean to do it at your expense. No hard feelings, ok? Really, I just wanted to get that sword away from you because you were trying to kill me. It seemed like the best way to do both, y’know? You’ll forgive me if I don’t pull it up for you, right?”

Sunflower just wobbles on her feet in silence.

Sequoia waves her hand in front of her face, as if dispersing the animosity between the two. “But don’t worry, I don’t hold it against you. I get how topsiders see me, but you’ve got me all wrong. I don’t want to harm anyone. I simply want to walk in love and peace, my steps in time with the heartbeat of the world.” She smiles a goofy, lopsided smile. “...And have some harmless fun along the way. I’m not a threat. I’m a clown. So are the others. We act like fools to make you laugh, not to make you angry.” Sequoia looks over her shoulder at the three

others disappearing in the distance before turning her attention back to Sunflower. “Those three... They’re something special. All they really have is their tiny world, and they shared it with me without reservations. Clowns have really big hearts, y’know? Don’t worry, I’ll smooth things over with them. I get the feeling they take things as personally as you do, but... not the type to hold grudges. And... we won’t tell anyone about this, it’ll be between the five of us, ok? We don’t want to ridicule you. Look, I can tell you’re actually a good person, so I’d like to give you some friendly advice. Just between the two of us. Don’t let your pride get ahead of your focus and just... chill out. Aren’t you a big hero? What kinda hero beats up people weaker than her? What kinda hero loses her temper at a game of keep away? Stop thinking so far ahead and live in the moment. The future doesn’t exist and the past is a delusion, we only have this instant. Take a minute to assess and... be chill for like, a minute. You’ll be a lot happier.” She stuffs her hands in her pockets again and shrugs. “Who knows? You may even smile. I will be too. May we see each other on that day.”

Sequoia turns on her heels and starts walking north. Sunflower just looks on in silence, her face a mixture of confusion and anger. Sequoia stops and looks over her shoulder. “Oh and I changed my mind. I wanna keep this metal sunflower. I’ve grown attached to it. But... If you’d like it, I guess that’s ok. All you need to do is apologize. See you then.”

Sunflower reaches her arm out and hardens her expression. “Demon! Some unfriendly advice. Read the guild bylaws. You have exactly one chance. I’ll be watching.”

Sequoia rolls her eyes. “Thanks for sparing me.”

“Consider it a stay of execution. One slip, and your tricks won’t be enough to save you. Be grateful for my mercy.”

Sequoia turns around and folds her arms in front of her. “And you should be thankful no one was hurt. If anything happened to any of them...” and her expression hardens to a fierceness no one would ever expect from her. “I would’ve had to *really* prank you.”

“Is that a threat?”

Sequoia lets out her breath and shakes her head, her expression softening. “Life’s a storybook, Sunflower. What kind of story do you want to write? I’ve already made my decision. I hope someday you’ll choose the same. I’ll be waiting.” She turns around and walks north, lazily waving her arm and forming a v with her fingers. “Peace.”

Sunflower is left standing alone, her arm falling limply to her side and her head hanging low.

The other three are waiting just past the parts and repair shop, where the street spills out into town square. Sequoia approaches them, smiling broadly. The gals start cheering and whistling, pulling her into a big group embrace when she gets close enough.

Lily pats Sequoia's back, grinning madly. "That was incredible Coy! I never would've thought you'd have it in you! You just stood up to Sunflower and won! Without even really doing anything!"

Sequoia closes her eyes and smiles, nodding. "There's always another way, gals. That's what being a clown's all about. She would make a great straight gal in an act! If she ever stops being a total psycho we should ask if she wants to be a guest actor."

Hemlock shakes her head, a relieved smile spread across her face. "That'll be the day. I can't believe you apologized to her after she tried to kill you. You could've fought her, and who knows what *that* outcome would've been, and you could've run away and not dealt with it, but you tried to make peace and harmlessly defused the scariest goddamn thing I've ever seen. That doesn't just take guts, it takes heart." Hemlock gives a burst of laughter. "Not really any brains, tho. But then, you are one of us, aren't you? Damned amazing."

Sequoia rubs the back of her neck and laughs. “You could hear all that embarrassing stuff?”

Oak scratches between her ears and gives a nervous smile. “She can’t but... Ah... I can. These ears aren’t just for decoration, y’know! Mostly they are. You’re something else, Coy. We’ve never even tried to defuse the animosity before. She just... knows exactly what buttons to push and then just punches them furiously from the start. We fall for it every time, too, but after that... Maybe someday, we can actually be friends with Sunflower and hear her stories.” She hangs her head and sighs. “Or at least be ignored by her. I’d settle for that honestly.” She shakes her head, her composure failing, then lunges forward and squeezes Sequoia as tight as she can. “I was so, so scared, I thought you were a goner for sure.”

Sequoia gives Oak a mischievous grin. “That reminds me, Oak, I didn’t know you’re a screamer. Does Lock have to leave the van? Or do you two have to leave since I’m here now?”

Oak’s eyes grow wide, and she peels off of Sequoia, laughing nervously. “... Haha th-that’s uhm... We ah... Y-you’re so mean Coy!”

Lily wraps her arm around Sequoia and Oak’s neck and limply hangs off of them. “No way, we don’t have any privacy curtains for a reason, y’know. Sorry, we’re gross,

you're just gonna have to enjoy it with us, or at least get used to it."

Sequoia smiles warmly and wraps her arm around Lily's shoulder. "I choose to enjoy it." She puts a little bit more of her weight on Lily. "Uhm, I'm sure Oak told all of you but..." She begins to shake. "Please don't say nothing about what I did back there, ok?" Her shaking intensifies, and Lily gives her a serious look. "There's no... no need... to..." She puts her full weight on Lily and starts to slough off of her. "unholy shit that was the most terrifying experience of my life it's time to sit down now plz"

Oak yelps in concern. "Coy?"

"I got her." and Hemlock catches Sequoia before she crumples to a heap on the ground.

Sequoia leans all of her weight into Hemlock. Her eyes start to droop and her mouth hang loose. "Do... Y'think... Yr frens... Mind..." Her eyes shut and she begins snoring lightly.

Hemlock picks her up and shakes her head down at her. "Poor kid. It's probably been a struggle to keep on her feet this whole time. Never knew such a tiny thing could be so strong. I mean, besides Lily and Birch."

Lily cocks her head to the side and smiles. "Nah. Well, maybe mom. But that strength puts mine to shame.

C'mon gals. Let's see what the scene at the Sweaty Boar's like in the daytime."

The three gals start walking towards the east side of the square, towards the tavern. Sequoia dreams. Flashes of the encounter pass through her mind, thoughts floating across her dimmed consciousness. The memory of Sunflower about to attack Sequoia comes into focus and snaps into place. "What's got you so stressed, Sunny?" Rewind. Stop. Slow down here, where she 's about to attack Hemlock. "If it's that hard on you... Why not share it with others?" Keep it slow... stop. Zoom in on her face, when she finally notices Sequoia. "There's always someone else who can take that burden... No one's ever alone, they just think they have to be. So why do you?" Fast forward. More. More. Stop on the frame where Sunflower gives Sequoia a chance. "My words got through, I know it. I'll do even better next time." She sinks deeper into her dreams, the scene playing on a loop slower and slower until she can notice every tiny shift in Sunflower's expression. Time slips away from Sequoia. Voices start piercing her dream state.

"Man, she really is out, huh. It's been forever."

"Don't put that garbage under her nose Lock, it's not smelling salts!"

"Sure it is, for Sequoias. Smellquoia salts."



“...You reached so far I’m surprised your hand isn’t in the ocean.”

“Hemlock seriously! We want her to wake up, not make her puke everywhere!”

“I can’t believe you really ordered that... Why is that even on the menu...”

“Hey, we need some stage blood, right? She is a demon, right? Two birds and all that.”

“You’re the worst. Hey, looks like she’s finally coming around. Coy?”

“Coy?”

Sequoia’s eyes snap open, and she feels herself leaning back against something hard. Her eyes settle on the plate of disgusting slop Hemlock’s holding under her nose. “Whuzzah... Yech! That smell’s so bad I dreamed I was in the Business District! What the Hell is that?”

Lily crosses her arms and grins at Sequoia from across the table. “Well well, look who’s finally up. We figured the smell of food would wake you up, but Lock kinda took it too far.”

Hemlock closes her eyes, sticks her nose in the air, and gives a fake snooty accent. “That, my dear Sequoia, is the smell of divinity. Probably why it smells so gross to you. The most potent aromatics steamed to putrefaction and

lovingly laid across three bratwursts aged in curry til they can no longer hold a shape.” She kisses her thumb and forefinger. “Divine.”

Sequoia wretches and sits up properly. “If that’s divinity I’m glad I’m damned. Seriously dude please move that garbage away from my nose.” Hemlock chuckles and brings the plate of “food” in front of herself. Sequoia rolls her eyes around the scene, trying to get her bearings. “Oh hey, it’s the Sweaty Boar. ...Where’s all the people?” Her eyes and nose finally find the shepherd’s pie and coffee in front of her. She crosses her arms and closes her eyes in mock annoyance. “More importantly, where’s all the food!”

Oak snickers and takes a french fry from Lily’s plate. “Sorry we didn’t get your usual ‘fifteen of everything on the menu and clean out the place up the street too while you’re at it.’ We figured you’d still wanna meet Delbruk, Turk, and Apricot today. As for the people...” Oak surveys the barren landscape of early afternoon, weekday Sweaty Boar Tavern. “This is the first time we’ve ever been here in the daylight. Guess not many other folks come this time of day either. It somehow makes it look... even seedier. We should come around this time more often.”

Sequoia picks up a bite of shepherd’s pie and pops it into her mouth. “Ah I was just joking around anyways. Thanks for getting me a coffee to go with this food. I didn’t expect something so tiny to wipe me out. I guess I should practice more after all, especially if she’s going to be

watching me wooOOOooooOOOoo. So hey, that was weird right?”

Lily swipes a pinch of fries from Oak’s plate. “Tell me about it. We’ve butted heads before, but she’s never tried to attack us, let alone tried to kill any of us. Usually it’s just her insulting us and going ‘you’re creating a disturbance’ blah blah ‘I’m so perfect and great’ yadda yadda.”

Sequoia waves around a forkful of pie and shakes her head. “No no, I mean... She’s a crazy skilled warrior, right? Like obviously after that display. Aren’t folks like that supposed to be super composed and calm, like your mom? We were literally just talking about that earlier, too.”

Lily rolls her eyes. “Don’t even compare Sunflower to my mom. Sunflower thinks ‘calm’ is ‘clam’ spelled wrong.”

“So she’s always a turbo psycho?”

“Not usually, honestly. Well...” Oak makes the so-so hand gesture. “Gruff and stern sure, but... Usually she just ignores Hemlock’s pokes and jabs. We’ve never seen her react like she did today.”

Sequoia chases down a bite with her coffee and leans forward. “See, that’s my point. None of that should’ve happened. She’s not dumb, she can see we saved lives. She’s crazy skilled, she has the focus and calm to let simple words roll off her back. Plus, there’s no way she couldn’t have grabbed that sword anytime she wanted if

her head was screwed on right. Look at how fast she was jumping up after it! I barely raised it in time. The way she looked at me and reacted, it's like something's up. Something that's got her scared, or anxious. There's no way the Crossguards would let her keep her badge if she went around beating up civilians and going into a blind rage at the drop of a hat."

Hemlock rolls her eyes and puts down her beer. "Yeah right. They'd probably give her a medal. She's a cop, and all cops are thugs and bullies. It's the only reason to become a cop. If you wanted to help people, you'd be a social worker. Being a cop inherently means you're willing to beat up defenseless people for a paycheck. Being a guild member just means she gets to be famous for being an asshole."

"See, normally I'd agree with you and say you had a point. Does a guild member usually try to kill someone in broad daylight in front of everyone?"

Hemlock rolls her head, conceding the point. "Well..."

Sequoia crosses her arms and nods. "Yeah. From the way Oak and Lily talked about Crossguards, they're supposed to be above that. Crusaders of justice and adventurers or whatever. Goody-two-shoes."

Annoyance leaks into Hemlock's face. "She ain't a goody-two-shoes. She didn't need to kill that serpent. We could've chased it off just fine. Wild animals won't return

to a place they see as dangerous. She killed that serpent for fun and profit.”

Sequoia stares at the last bite of pie and sighs. “I dunno, man. Look at how efficiently and quickly she killed it. She killed it instantly, in a way where it wouldn’t suffer.” She shakes her head. “That’s not heartless. Cold, maybe. Sad, yes. I’m not saying what she did was the right thing. Killing’s always wrong.” Her eyes roll to look at the rafters, as if the words she’s looking for are hiding up there. “Well... maybe not food so much. That’s a tough one. Thank you, noble sheep, for your sacrifice. I won’t waste this meal.” Sequoia scoops up the last bite and stares at it a moment longer. “Kinda too bad she couldn’t have brought the beast with her for a fish fry for the town. Seems like a waste. I’ll talk to her about that next time. Maybe turning something so sad into something so positive will give her some comfort and happiness.” She pops the food in her mouth and takes her time savoring it. “Where was I? Oh right. Anyways. Look at how agitated she was after she killed it. She wouldn’t have defended her point so strongly if it was for fun. She would’ve bragged and laughed. She really did believe with every bit of her that it was the only way to keep people safe. That hurt her. You could see it in her eyes.”

Oak scratches the nape of her neck and tugs on the hair back there. “Well...”

Sequoia puts her hands flat on the table and leans forward. “I wanna be clear off the bat, we were right, I believe that firmly. It really is sad to me that that thing is dead. I believe it would have never returned if we managed to scare it away. When you defended your points, because you believe them and should, she went from zero to turbo psycho in like... no time. Why?” She shrugs, waiting for an answer and receives none. “Hemlock was right, too, why *does* she waste her time on a buncha idiot losers like us? She could’ve just reported the bounty, job done, and ignored us. If she really believed what she said about the three of you, she’d either let you rush into stuff like that in the hopes that whatever monster kills you, or she’d arrest you for being in the way. So why fight? She could tell those workers were cornered. We did a good thing today. She’s not stupid, she could see that, so why get so pissed over it? She killed it, the same as if we weren’t there. And then why be so horrified about me being here, try to kill me, then give me advice albeit cryptic advice, and let me go in the span of like ten minutes? More than that, she gave me a chance when she seemed to believe I was the start of something dangerous. For someone who saved the world, that took heart. Why get literally blinded with rage at a simple game of keep away? Why drop her focus? Why let me win? It’s like... her heart’s trying to catch up with her brain and she won’t let it. Like she wants to be angry and lose control.” She tilts her head to emphasize her point. “Doesn’t that seem... odd?”

Hemlock talks into her mug as she takes a swig. “And the offense at plastering the poster on the guild wall?”

Sequoia closes her eyes and leans back in her chair, arms folded. “That’s just pride, dude. Can’t deny she’s super proud of herself and things important to her. You lied to her to push her over the edge on purpose.”

Hemlock laughs and gives a fiendish grin. “Yep, and it was fun too.” She taps her finger on the table and furrows her brow. “If she got so angry over words and stained walls that she’d severely beat people who are weaker than her, she doesn’t deserve that badge or sword. Just another mad dog for someone like Sun Tea to put down. You’re right, with skills like that, she should be focused and calm. Anyone who goes that ballistic so fast with that kinda authority and power is a menace, not us.”

Oak lulls her head back and forth, as if two ideas are waging a battle on either side of her brain. “I mean Coy is literally an unbound demon on Earth, something that isn’t supposed to be possible. It’s not like that’s in any scripture as a sign of the end times, but to someone like the Crossguards that must make them think big world stuff’s about to pop off. She did have to deal with the whole Rainsoaked summoner thing ten years ago. If it even happened.”

Sequoia puts her finger on her chin and examines the rafters more deeply. “I dunno tho. She seemed to have

enough of her faculties to know that killing a person, even a demon, right in front of a bunch of witnesses would've probably caused a huge problem."

Oak's ears droop and her head limps, shaking slowly. "No actually, it would've been within her right. I think that's what she meant by reading the guild's bylaws."

Lily snags the last fry and chews on the end of it. "Whaddya mean?"

"She probably meant Article 38 of their bylaws, which talks about their legal authority over citizens of the different nations of the world."

Sequoia's eyes grow wide. "You've *memorized* the guild bylaws, Oak?"

Oak scratches between her ears. "Not exactly, but I have read their charter and understand... most of it. It's good to know how far you can push boundaries before they break. And how to de-escalate by reminding them of their own dumb rules with witnesses around." She closes her eyes and shrugs. "Or make it way worse depending on who's pushing you around. Knowledge is power, and power is useless." She puts her elbow on the table and starts waving her hand as she talks. "But that one's particularly weird and interesting because like we said, the Crossguards' authority has essentially no boundaries. They can go anywhere in the world, use their authority anywhere in the world, but that presents complications.



Who is and is not a 'citizen' if their authority goes everywhere? I mean, besides Arclight. If a person has no legally recognized identity anywhere in the world, such as people who choose to have no identity, down and out folks forgotten by the law, and folks living outside the system, what do you do if they 'break the law'? What can you do? They're still citizens of the world by definition of being here. So Article 38 defines citizenship, identity, and how to 'process' such folks."

Sequoia mock wretches. "That's probably the single grossest thing I've heard since coming up here."

Oak giggles. "Right? So you're totally stateless, see. You're also an especially weird case because you... well... kinda have no point of origin? No legally recognized race? No actual address or home? The three of us put Lily's folks' place as our home address, and they vouch for us if/when they need to. The point of origin is where you were born, so for Lily and I it's Yama, Brezitella, Brezitella being the country Yama's in."

"What about Lock?"

Hemlock shrugs and puts her hands behind her head. "It merely says 'Brezitella'. I was adopted and my home village had no legally recognized point of origin. We were a village of squatters, anarchists, and miscreants. It's not there anymore, so there's no way to prove what legal

boundary in Brezitella it fell under. Not like I could point it out on a map or find where it was again anyways.”

“Was? Were? Anymore?”

“Yep.”

Sequoia stares at Hemlock, who just side eyes Sequoia and starts whistling. Sequoia slumps forward after a few seconds. “Fine, be that way. I’ll get that story out of you yet, Lock”

Hemlock flashes a grin and rocks her chair back on two legs. “You can try.”

Oak rolls her eyes. “Aaaaaanyway, even folks without IDs are defined under Article 38 just by mere fact of being born in the world. Let’s say for a sec that Hemlock didn’t have an ID. She’d still fall under it because she was definitely born on this continent, considering her accent and financial inability to travel abroad, and half-elves are a legally recognized race, so she would fall into a subsection of citizenship where if she broke the law in a country, she would go through their legal system without any chance of extradition. Since y’know. No state and country or anything. Which isn’t much different from the rest of us. Only important people are noticed by the system, and important people have states. It’s also why they even bother having something like ‘Human (Variant)’ as a race option on IDs. It’s not common, but there’s enough people out there who aren’t quite human or elf or whatever

anymore that need to fall under some category. Everyone has to fit into some legal niche. It's pretty rare, but there's some folks who can't prove their identity, but in the end, it doesn't matter. They're just processed as Jane or John Doe #420 of whatever continent they're on, sentenced to ten years for being a total jerk to everyone."

Sequoia thinks for a few moments. "Sooo... Why would I be any different? Why bring up race? ... Ooooooh that's what you're getting at. Because I'm a demon..."

Oak's face falls and she nods slowly. "Yeah. Article 38 makes provisions for 'unnatural entities' because of the whole pact-summoning thing. And other weird summoning rituals. Pact-summoned demons, sure, the record is about seven hours from back seven hundred years ago, so it's kind of a moot point, but they're not the only summoned entity. The record for that is six years. No one denies demons and other such entities are sentient and sapient even, but since they technically aren't of this world, they don't fall under any legal jurisdiction. So to bypass that, any Crossguard has full authority to banish or otherwise 'neutralize' the entity and their summoner without trial for 'crimes against reality'. It's one of the many reasons there just really isn't anyone doing much summoning these days. Besides that mess in Rainsoaked ten years ago, which is why they bothered to include the summoner in the punishment. If it even happened. Probably an elaborate excuse to include that clause so

they can keep people controlled more easily. That's why you're an especially weird case. You don't fall under that definition either. You... don't appear to have been summoned? You don't even fit the historical descriptions of summoned demons? You also don't match any legally recognized race."

Sequoia closes her eyes and smiles, nodding to herself. "I knew I was really unique and cool."

Oak takes on an uncharacteristically annoyed expression and huffs. "This is real serious Coy! We have absolutely *no idea* how to keep you safe! That stuff from this morning *might* help, but we aren't even sure about that! My guess is Sunflower was saying 'you better figure out a way to get a continental ID before you cross paths with someone else who won't be so merciful when you fuck up.'"

Sequoia waves her hands in front of her. "See all that just proves my point! She let me go, gals. She *let* me win. She really does have a big heart. Once she was calmed down, she got that focus back and could see the big picture. She gave me a chance. If she really thought I was the start of something major... Why do any of that?" She folds her arms over the table and looks around. "Something's there, in the background. This isn't some beat cop kicking a person living on the street cuz they disgust them, or warlord slaughtering a village for daring to look at them. It's all an act. I don't even think she

would've seriously hurt either of you. She's too skilled to need to. She's struggling. She's hurting badly. I don't think she wants this anymore, gals, but she feels like she isn't allowed to stop! Not when she feels the world is literally depending on her! And she's got so so much life ahead of her! It's too sad. No matter which way is true, saving the world when you're not even an adult yet has to be real traumatic. She's barely one now! And to keep doing the hero stuff for ten years after... That's a huge toll, gals. It's like... there's another crisis, or she's so paranoid she sees every weird thing like me as a potential crisis because she's totally traumatized, and she *knows* in her *bones* like you know about Cecilia that she's the only one who can do it. It's not true, but she knows it, and it's twisting her up inside. You gotta have a whole lotta love in you to sacrifice your happiness for the world. That's why she can't let it go and just... let someone else deal with it. She doesn't trust anyone else to do the job. Saving the world once is too much for anyone. If your job's done... Have some fun. You're still young... Live, breathe, play. You've done more than literally everyone else in the world. You've earned the right to just... be a person in the world. She doesn't even seem to run with a crew like us. She feels like she has to be alone. That anyone with her is just gonna get hurt, and she doesn't want that. So she continues on the only way she knows." Sequoia's head falls and she talks into her chest. "It's... heartbreaking."

Oak just stares at her, eyes wide. "...How the hell did you come to those conclusions after seeing her in action for like, ten minutes?"

Sequoia closes her eyes and shakes her head. "Came to me in a dream. Close your mind and open your heart and you'll see it too."

Oak sighs deeply. "Maybe she had a point about using our brains... I said your brain would catch on fire, I just didn't mean literally two hours later."

Hemlock pushes her largely untouched plate forward and turns her empty beer mug upside down. "Who knows what's going on in that head of hers. Damn crazy snoop. Anyways, I can't finish this garbage. Why did I order it again?"

Lily shrugs. "Because you thought it was funny."

Hemlock gives a short laugh. "Oh yeah. Gotta admit, it was a pretty good gag."

Sequoia makes a face and sticks out her tongue. "Literally gagging from that smell." She gulps down the last of her coffee and settles back in her chair. "Well whatever. I'll see her again, and next time, I'm gonna get that smile."

At this point, the bartender, the only apparent front of the house staff at this time of day, walks out from behind the bar with a slip of paper. She's tall and thin, with her

straight dirty blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail. “Your bill, folks.”

Sequoia looks up at her and tilts her head. “Oh? It’s not Tabby?”

“Tabby works the night shift. I’m Sarah, I work the days. If I were you four, I would probably pay and run through the back. Like... now. It’s not like I don’t want you here, but... well... I don’t think she’d be very happy, and it’s hard to calm her down.”

Lily digs into her pockets. “She who?”

Sarah just looks at her watch and drops her arm limply to her side. “I warned you. It’s about to be too late.”

Lily frowns and digs deeper in her pocket. “Alright alright, I trust ya. Just... taking me a sec. I thought this was supposed to be neutral ground.”

Sarah nods and folds her arms. “Yep, it is. Everything has its limits tho.” She looks at her watch again and turns back to the bar. “...It’s too late. Just leave the money on the table and book it through the front after she sits at the bar. If it’s short, you can give the rest to Tabby tonight.” She settles in her spot in the middle of behind the bar and looks at Sequoia. “And hey. Thanks for understanding... Coy, right?”

Oak rolls her eyes up into her thoughts. “Well that’s not at all cryp-”

A loud crash rings through the empty tavern as the door slams open. The stained glass pane rattles in its housing as it hits the host station. Sunflower crowds the doorway for a moment before stomping in, hair dripping wet. Her eyes immediately find Sarah. "Sarah! The usual, CLEAN dry dish rags, and no quest-" Her eyes dart to the side and fall on the gals. She turns her head towards them, her face growing red with rage, before focusing her vision back on Sarah, stomping all the way to the bar. She slams her sheathed sword down across the bar as Sarah pours a cup of coffee for her.

The gals just sit in stunned silence, frozen in place, staring at Sunflower's back. Lily manages to snap out of her stupor and lowers her voice to a barely audible whisper. "(No way. She's one of us?)"

Sequoia gets an awful, terrible smile going on her face. She matches Lily's whisper. "(...I'm gonna go invite her to the show tomorrow.)"

Oak hisses out "(Coy, no! Didn't you hear what I just said?)"

Lily's own smile grows more fiendish. "(It's neutral ground, Oak. If she's here, she knows that. Do it, Coy.)"

Sunflower doesn't even bother turning her head over her shoulder. "I can hear you, you know. Take one step towards me and I may forget what 'neutral grounds' means. And if you think I'd ever go to one of your bozo



acts, you're sorely mistaken. Besides, didn't you put up an ad on my... how did you say it... 'shitheap guild's' wall?"

Lily shrugs and tosses some money on the table. "It was worth a try. Better take Sarah's advice and book it." She barely waits for Oak to stand up before grabbing her hand and dashing for the exit. Hemlock jumps over the table and bolts across the tavern to the door.

Sequoia lags behind, and tosses behind her shoulder "plz smooth things over for me Sarah kthnxbai ty" before running out the door.

Sunflower shakes. She grits her teeth and clenches her fist around the hilt of her sword. "Those... Those fucking..."

Sarah puts her hand over the sword's sheathe and shakes her head. "Hey, Sunflower. Chill for a bit and listen. Everything's on the house if you do. I'll even throw a shot in your coffee and unlimited jukebox tokens for a week."

## Chapter 8

Things are quieting down in Feymist. The workers are all returning to the docks and people are continuing on with their day. The hustle and bustle of commerce and chores can't be stopped by something as benign as a

monster attack, only delayed. People go to the grocery store, work out contracts with various guilds, wander out in search of fast, cheap food for their lunch breaks. So it's only a little jarring when four people bust out of a tavern at warp speed, meandering through the alleys and streets from the Boar, spilling out into town square and running to the fountain before huffing and puffing. Only a few heads turn to look at the weird looking girl with blackish hair whooping and laughing her fool head off. "Did you see that?!" Sequoia sits on the edge of the fountain and wraps her arms around her stomach, laughing. "I can't believe it! That's fate, gals. Phew! Whatta rush!"

Oak pants, her breath catching up with her. "You and I have very different ideas of a rush. I can't believe she's one of us! All this time! Guess the army jacket and tactical pants should've given it away."

Sequoia starts calming down, leaning back and propping herself up with her hands on either side of her. "I knew I'd see her again, I just didn't expect so soon. So what's this 'neutered ground' thing you mentioned."

Lily's face goes flat. "It's *neutral* ground. Do you do this shit on purpose, Coy."

Sequoia closes her eyes and smiles smugly. "I'll never tell."

Hemlock puts a hand on her hip and starts waving her other hand. "So folks in every community have a lot of

drama, just by virtue of being a community. Gals like us are no different. That drama can spill over into huge blow out arguments, and if you do that in a crowded place, other people are gonna get pulled into it too, especially in a town this small, and it really sours things for everyone. The Sweaty Boar being a place we took over, rather than be a lesbian joint by intent, the folks here decided that no argument, no conflict, no matter the severity, is allowed to be expressed inside or just outside the building. We get to keep our place, everyone has a good time, and people settle their disputes out somewhere else, preferably in private. Bigotry is the only exception. If someone espouses some hateful shit, they get thrown out immediately, by force. It's always free season on bigots, and Lil and I are always happy to answer the call." She shrugs. "Society is just a buncha polite compromises, and this one works pretty well. So, because she knows about it and visits the Boar, Sunflower can't do shit to us while we're in there without getting a lifetime ban." Hemlock starts walking towards Feymist Ave, and gestures to a plain looking building on her left. The only notable things about it are the sign hanging from above the door depicting the hilt and crossguard of a sword, and the colorful poster stapled on the side of the wall. "For example, if she saw this, and we were in the Boar, she couldn't so much as yell at us about it."

Sequoia gets up and follows Hemlock, then stops in front of the poster. “That’s the guild? Hm...” A wicked smile spreads slowly across her face. “Hehe.”

Oak’s eyes go wide upon seeing Sequoia’s expression. “*That’s* a scary look.”

Sequoia stands in front of the poster and looks suspiciously to either side of her. “Hey gals... Give me some cover, ok? Watch for trouble, this’ll only take a moment.” The other three surround her, their backs to her. There’s a popping sound, and a small rain cloud forms nearby and floats to the fountain, threatening to flood it. Sequoia laughs smugly. “Challenge accepted, Sunflower. Your move. Let’s go gals.”

Oak stares at Sequoia, then the poster, then Sequoia again. “What’re you... ..Did you just...”

“Rewrite the reality of the bricks behind our poster so they’re inexorably colored and designed like our poster with my name in huge letters? Yep. She’ll be soooo pissed when she pulls down the poster and sees that. She’ll *have* to come to our show tomorrow to tell me to change it back. Or paint over that section of the wall.”

Lily tilts her head back with laughter. “Holy shit Coy, that’s the worst thing I’ve ever heard! I love it!” She levels her gaze with Sequoia. “You sure you’re not taking things too far? What about your one chance?”

Sequoia puts her hands behind her head as everyone starts walking down Feymist Ave. “Nah, I’m not worried about that. If I left it at the poster, she could ignore that, but this? She’ll have no choice but to find me and tell me to change it back. She needs to know I’m serious about getting through to her.” Her fiendish smile returns. “And that I’m a terrible lil shithead. Harmless, but absolutely the worst. There’s more than one way to make someone smile and laugh. I wish I could see her face when she sees that.” The gals walk down the street, walking two on two so the other people going about their day can squeak past them. Sequoia puts a finger on her chin and searches the sky for clouds shaped like her thoughts.

Lily shakes her head. “It’s like I can hear the gears in your brain grinding to a halt.”

“I was just thinking about what Oak was talking about with that guild bylaw and getting an ID. I can’t exactly hide the fact that I’m a demon, and she said it’s not a legally recognized race or whatever. But Sunny does have a point, I definitely do need one... ..Oak has a tail...”

Oak hangs back, walking on the other side of Sequoia. A group of people going the opposite direction go single file to get by. “Not like yours. I don’t have horns either.”

“But... You said there’s a whole category for weird people. So why can’t I be a weird exception too? We can

just lie and say I fucked up a ritual like you. Who cares about what's true or not. I'm weird for a demon because I'm solid, so none of that other garbage applies to me, right? How can they prove anything? We're all good at improv, we'll figure it out. Besides, I don't care what some busybody nerd puts in a file somewhere about me. People can say whatever they want, it doesn't make it true. It's just so I can function up here easier, and that's all I care about anyways. It's not like I find being called Human (Variant) insulting."

Oak tilts her head to one side, weighing Sequoia's words. "Hm... That's a good point... You'd need a birth certificate which obviously you don't have... Yeah, I can handle that. An ID is beyond my skill but I can do a birth cert no sweat. So, what do you want it to say?"

Sequoia slouches and shoves her hands in her pockets. "Whatever. It doesn't matter. Caring about that stuff is for big world folks. Let someone else who actually cares figure that out."

Oak's ears droop and she hangs her head. "It's like everything I said fell right out your ears..." She picks herself back up and smiles. "We'll figure out the details later. If we go just before they close they'll probably just stamp it through. Another tragic victim of a ritual gone wrong, time to clock out. It'd be easiest if we just put Yama, Brezitella as your point of origin, and your name oh so coincidentally matches Brezitella's naming tradition, so I'll

use the tavern's phone tonight to call Lily's folks and get their approval to let you put down their address as your home address. They'll for sure go along with it. What's your birth date?"

"October 25th, 20001, but we go by the year of our banishment so I dunno what topsiders call this year. I do know our days and months line up, tho."

"Oops, we never really talked about that, did we? It's 2007 of the seventh era cycle, or 7EC. So you were born in 1986, 7EC."

"Seventh era cycle?"

Oak shrugs. "The Reveal was so long ago that folks realized that it'd be a mouthful to say it was, say, year twenty-one thousand, three hundred and forty-five, so we divided up the years by blocks of three millennia, each one being a cycle. This is the seventh cycle since the year Cecilia revealed herself. No clue why they chose three instead of five or ten. Probably has to do with some ancient king's forearm length or something."

Sequoia laughs. "Cool, tomorrow we'll spend the day rehearsing and practicing, then the day after we'll go over and get that taken care of." She takes in her surroundings, looking at each shop as they pass it. "Hey, what is the name of this part of town anyways? You said it was a district for folks like us, but forgot to mention the name."

Lily smooths out her tie and puts her hands in her pockets. "Oh right. Sorry, we're just so used to it we barely even reference it. Technically, it doesn't have a name, but all of us call it Penny District. And you're about to ask why, aren't you."

"Duh."

"It's actually pretty clever. If it hasn't been called that longer than I've been alive, then I would've said I came up with it. So we were telling you about money and currency last night. Remember how you asked how something could be 11.99?"

"I was talking about bites, not money, but yeah."

"Money comes in a lot of forms, coins, bills, and each has a different value. You add .01 to 11.99 and you get 12. That .01 is called a penny, the most worthless form of currency. An absolute nuisance that no one likes." Lily shrugs. "I mean, all currency is essentially worthless, honestly. Money's just a way to define your status in the world and hold power that doesn't actually exist over others. Take that away, and it's burnable trash and metal for melting down into far more useful things, such as a statuette." She looks slightly up, scanning the tops of the buildings in front of her. "People are the same; like money, we have no real meaning or purpose. We just think we do and believe in it hard enough until we delude ourselves into making it real. Anyway, point being, everyone hates



'em, they clutter up everything, and they keep being foisted onto people for no reason at all. That shep's pie could've been \$12 instead of \$11.99 and there'd be literally no difference to everyone. It'd make the tavern more money, even. It's all a trick to make you think it costs less than it actually does, but in reality it's essentially the same price. So, folks like us fall into that. Worthless drifters unwanted by anyone cluttering up a drawer in a large desk of more important things. The whole worthless thing is ironic, not that we literally think of ourselves as worthless. That's just how people see us, so we took it from them."

Sequoia rolls her head to one side. "But I thought you said people lived and owned shops here? How can they be drifters?"

"Metaphorically. Queer folks, we don't really have a home for the most part. Not like we actually need to have one anyways, any sort of person can blend into society as much as they want or don't want. The world belongs to everyone, nobody needs a special zone just for them." She looks at Sequoia, not bothering to watch where she's going. "But, blending in is also hiding, isn't it? Once you stop hiding and start being true to yourself, people who don't understand you, they get uncomfortable. Feel threatened. If you were to rub away the silver shine of a quarter and find it was a penny in a wrapper, you'd throw it away in disgust." She wriggles a hand out of her pocket

and lifts a finger to the air. “But remember, the tavern would make more money if they included that extra penny. Society would be vastly richer and happier with everyone in it, us, them, because there really is no difference between anyone. It’s just your relationship with each other that creates the division between us and them. Society, by and large, doesn't want us, because we’re small in number and alien to the overall culture of people. They don’t get that it’s simply our relationship with each other, nothing to do with them at all. Like the relationship of a penny to the cost of something. There’s 1,199 pennies in 11.99, but because we phrase it as 11.99, they only see it as something that should be 12.00 and the .01 is an annoyance being forced on them for no reason. Kinda absurd, isn’t it?” Lily shrugs. “That’s life for ya, just different perspectives of the same truth that doesn’t exist. That 11.99, they push us out of their spaces and we float from place to place, pocket to pocket, drawer to drawer, jar to jar, trash to trash, until someone decides to flick it into a wishing well and be rid of the terrible thing forever.”

“Buuut... What if someone thinks that penny’s lucky and holds onto it?”

Lily shakes her head. “That’s drifting from the point a bit, but in that case they’re just keeping us in their pocket to pull out when they need us. Still keeping us tucked away until they find use for us, y’see? Like corporate shops claiming to be queer friendly. It’s a sham to get you to

shop there. Getting back to the metaphor, we sink down to the bottom of that wishing well, never to be dredged up. The only thing more worthless than a penny is a whole lot of pennies. But see, therein lies the beauty. It's all perspective. You throw a penny in a wishing well, nothing happens. It's just a cute thing for kids. Something worthwhile to do with your dumb penny, finally, at last. All those pennies at the bottom, for those 11.99s, it's just a whole lot of irritating problems they don't want to deal with. But for us .01s that everyone else threw away, we know you can add 'em all up and make something special with 'em. You can make a dream come true. You can find a place you belong, one you made for yourself with all those other worthless pennies. But then, if the penny didn't exist, there'd be no wishing wells, no dreams to make real. No one throws useful things into wishing wells. And that's why it's called Penny District."

Sequoia smiles warmly to herself, gazing at the road ahead. "That's real poetic, honestly. You'd never notice that if you weren't a fellow penny."

"Exactly! I knew you'd get it." Lily mimes thoughtfulness by stroking her chin. "Hm... well, I guess I can spoil the surprise ahead of time. So, Knoll Ave, you probably are thinking of grassy knoll, right."

"Yeppers."

“The actual spelling of the avenue is N-U-L-L. Because it’s a literal dead end that never went anywhere. All these streets used to have numbers instead of names. But that’s also where the district started. A real nothing place, like the bottom of a wishing well. But we took nothing, or null, and made it into a beautiful lump of grass and flowers, and an entire field of flowers grew outta that. We could’ve renamed it Knoll, it would’ve been easy to do, but... You never want to forget where you came from.” Lily shrugs and slouches. “Of course, when I say ‘we’, I just mean folks like us in general. Like I said, it was named Penny District and Knoll Ave by people way back before we were born. The four of us, we’re literal drifters, annoying pennies that keep popping up in people’s pockets. Real weirdos not satisfied with being with a buncha fellow pennies or the 11.99s. Even a penny can jump out of a wishing well, Coy. All it needs to do is push until that wish is a reality. That’s us. We’re the pennies that pushed until we leapt outta the well, the .04 that fits nowhere but our own little world. As we should be.”

Sequoia closes her eyes and smiles. “As we should be, Lil.” Hemlock leads the gals down a wide side alley with a sign declaring it to be Null Ave. There’s no road that goes through there, but then it’s not exactly an alleyway either. Several shops make their home here, all rather humble looking and made of brick with heavy, glassless wooden doors and windowed storefronts. A cafe, a convenience store, at the dead end is a comic book shop, and then

there's the two stores Hemlock stops in front of: Apricot's Alchemical Agents and Apothecary Asupply, and a thrift store called Threadful Portents.

Oak heads over to the goofy named apothecary shop and puts her hand on the door handle. "Hey, you three go on ahead. I'm gonna go talk with Apri and bring her over. I get the feeling we're gonna need her expertise real soon, and... well... No way am I gonna make her wait for a photo to see Hemlock pay off that bet!"

Hemlock rolls her eyes. "It ain't that big of a deal, Oak."

"Haha can't blame me for trying to get under your skin for once. See you all in a minute, with one Apricot in tow." and Oak enters the apothecary's shop. Lily leads the other two into Threadful Portents. A bell chimes as they walk in. It's not exactly dimly lit, but the lack of sunlight coming from the storefront's window and the cheap overhead lighting gives it that impression. Rows and rows of clothing stretch before the gals, with some shelves tucked in a corner full of brick-a-brack. Plates, mugs, statuettes, busted up old electronics, old toys, paintings, y'know. Thrift store clutter. There's a corner dedicated to old, donated books and records.

The man behind the counter's head perks up at the chime of the bell, and his eyes and smile grow wide when he sees who his customers are. He's not short, but not tall

either, and he fills his smart suit well. His salt and pepper beard is neatly and sharply trimmed. A carnation rests in his lapel. If he wasn't in a dingy old thrift store, you'd swear he was an executive somewhere. Judging from the lack of customers and the location of the store, the only person he could be dressing up for is the prodigiously tall orc wearing board shorts and a tropical floral button up shirt straightening out some shelves, because he is. Seriously, this orc is so tall that Hemlock's head only comes up to his chin. It feels like he's going for a surfer slash beach bum vibe, because he is. His shaggy, dark brown hair hangs just below his pointy ears and his tusks fall well short of his nose. If you thought the business-minded one looked happy to see the gals, you haven't seen this guy yet. He strides over to the gals, waving. "Lily! Hemlock! How wonderful to see you two again!" He scoops Lily up in a big bear hug. "Where's your other half?"

Lily's crushed, but she doesn't seem to mind. "Hey Turk!" She squeaks an arm from out of the embrace and waves at the man behind the counter. "Hey Delbruk! It's always great to see you two! Oak's out getting Apri and bringing her over."

Delbruk steps out from behind the counter and heads over to the gals. He reaches out to shake Hemlock's hand. "Hello gals, it's good to see you again."

Hemlock takes the hand and squeezes tight, looks Delbruk dead in the eyes and makes the most serious face she possibly can. “Awright mate.”

Delbruk busts up laughing and eases his hand out of the pleantry, shaking it loosely. “Pfft haha stop stop! I *hate* it when you make that face! It always gets me!” He peers around Hemlock and notices Sequoia standing just in front of the doorway, taking in the scene. “And hello to you, young lady. You must be the oh so mysterious newest member of the troupe. I’m Delbruk, co-owner of Threadful Portents, the best,”

Turk picks up this well practiced introduction. “And only,”

Both proudly proclaim the end with a flourish. “thrift store in all of Penny District!” Delbruk steps back and wraps an arm around Turk’s waist. “and this is my husband, Turk, the other co-owner of the fine establishment you find yourself in.”

Turk bends down to Sequoia’s level, and waves with a smile. “Hello little one! It’s very good to meet you! Tabby wasn’t joking, you really did join these gals’ troupe?”

Sequoia still has to gaze up at him. She gives a huge smile and reaches her hand out to shake. She wraps her hand around two of Turk’s fingers instead. “Yep! I guess word travels fast around here. The name’s Sequoia but most topsiders call me Coy for short. I probably should’ve

just said Coy. Anyways, it's real nice to meet you, these three have been hyping you two up all day."

Turk bends back up to his full height and gives a sly grin. "'Topsiders'? Oooh so Tabby wasn't fooling around! She was telling us you're from the" and he makes his voice huskier and deeper. "'Deep south'."

Sequoia laughs and puts her hands in her pockets. "Yeah! Way deep!" Her eyes roll thoughtfully to the ceiling. If she wasn't a performer she'd be a ceiling installation expert. "Altho Hell is more like a lower dimension? So not actually deep, just... Uhm. Ok so bear with me here but this is the third dimension sorta right? 3D stuff in a specific reality. And Hell is like... The zeroth dimension in another reality. No that's not right. Uhm."

Lily sighs and shakes her head. "Seriously Coy you shouldn't go around telling people you're from Hell, especially if you're gonna confuse them with stuff like that."

Turk laughs. "Oh please, like you can't tell just by looking at her. You should show off those horns more girl! You can do all sorts of interesting things with them, really jazz 'em up!"

Sequoia rocks on her heels. "Nah, that's not for me. I'm not attached to them, I mean I am, but like... Not attached attached just attached."



Delbruk shakes his head and smiles. "Don't let him get you all flustered, he gets very excited for dramatic styles. Once he sees a new thing to decorate, well... he can't help himself."

"Don't tell me you don't want to see a bow tied to each one of them."

Sequoia busts out a short laugh. "That'd be real weird looking! I'm kinda the grungy type, sorry to disappoint. I'm not really one for dresses or skirts or ribbons or anything. On stage... that's one thing, but in my day to day life, that's another. I like my big baggy jeans and tank, but it's all I own. Altho I was told you two are experts so you would know what would look good on me better than I would, I bet. I'm not opposed to trying anything like that on," and she looks up at Hemlock and gets a smarmy smile on her face. "unlike a certain gal who lost a certain bet."

Turk's eyes go wide and he folds his arms in front of his broad chest and bends down to Hemlock's level, his face close to hers. "Ooooooh? Did somebody lose a beeeeet? And pray tell, what were the conditions of this bet?" Hemlock knows how to play this game. Don't make a fuss out of it, and you rob Turk of his fun. So she mutters under her breath and looks out the window, as if hoping a meteor or something crashes into the alley and saves her from this "misery". Turk puts a hand to his ear and leans forward. "I couldn't hear you, could you repeat that?"

Might as well give Turk his satisfaction. Hemlock grits her teeth, and mutters barely in audible range. “You gotta pick out a dress for me to try on.”

Turk clasps his hands together and his open smile grows as wide as his eyes. He wraps his arm around Hemlock’s shoulder and forcibly drags her off to another section of the store. Delbruk turns to Sequoia, one arm folded over his chest, the other’s elbow propped up on it and placing his hand thoughtfully over his mouth. He looks her up and down, studying her carefully. “So that’s all you own, is it Coy... Hm... Did you pick out what you’re wearing or did you scavenge it?”

“I created it. It’s what I was wearing when I found myself up here.”

“Are you... part of the family?”

“Family?”

Lily rolls her eyes. It’s tough having to spell things out to someone new to the world. “Gay.”

“Oh yeah, that, yeah sure, gals are great.”

Delbruk strokes his beard. “I see... Yes... And you like baggy clothing... You’re pretty small... A vision is coming to me...” He pounds his fist into his open hand. “Yes! I have it! Lemme get a few things and see how you feel.”

Sequoia wobbles on her feet slightly and her head droops. “Sounds... Sounds great. I’m just gonna... have a seat over there.” and she heads over to a chair by the dressing rooms and sits down, holding her head in her hands. Slight snoring comes from her.

Delbruk’s eyes are wide as he turns to Lilly. “Is she ok?”

“She’s fine. It’s kind of a long story.” Delbruk nods and heads into the aisles, looking at a shirt and shaking his head before moving on. “I have to say, Del, you’re taking this all in stride pretty well.”

He plucks a forest green and red flannel shirt from the rack and drapes it over his arm. “Please, the most surprising thing is that you took on another member. The rest of her deal is interesting, but inconsequential. What made you decide to have her perform with you?”

Lily idly peruses the record bin, talking over her shoulder. “She just got up here, Del. She should be having fun and enjoying herself, not stuck doing Freelancing garbage or some hourly job. I can’t imagine anything more fun and fulfilling than performing. Besides, she’s got a knack for it.”

“Is that so?” He puts a suit blazer atop the growing pile hooked onto his arm. “I think tomorrow’s show will be very interesting indeed.”

The bell above the door chimes, and Oak leads in a tallish elf woman with straightened pitch black hair that reaches down to her waist. She has it tied off on the bottom at points, the ties clacking together as she moves. She wears earthy toned, loose fitting clothes that give the impression of being robes without actually being robes. She's carrying a black satchel, gripped tightly by slender hands wearing nitrile gloves. Oak spots Sequoia dozing on the chair and shakes her head. "It looks like we're too late... Figures. Whaddya think, Apri?"

Apricot slips past Oak and stands before Sequoia. "I take it this is the patient?" Oak nods. She puts the satchel on the floor and kneels down, opens it, and takes a small flashlight out of it. She gently lifts Sequoia's eyelids and shines the light into them. "Yeah. Already in REM. Fascinating. Judging from the bags under her eyes, she doesn't seem to be sleeping well."

Lily lifts a record out of the bin, tilts her head, shakes it, and puts the record back. "She slept well last night at least. Before then she was sleeping on the stone floor of the catacombs under the college so I can't say I'm surprised."

Apricot nods and kneels, pulling Sequoia's cheeks back and examining her teeth. "Incisors... molars... slightly elongated sharp canines but that doesn't matter much. Likely, she has the same diet as any of us." She peers

deeper. “Yeah, just as I thought. Malnourished, too. What has she been eating?”

Lily turns and leans against the record bin, shrugs, and folds her arms in front of her. “Campfire food and stuff at the Boar. She said before then she was getting scraps from the university’s commissary.”

“I thought as much.” Delbruk walks past her, hanging up a small wardrobe in a fitting room. Apricot takes a capsule from her satchel and cracks it under Sequoia’s nose, then waves it slightly under it.

It takes a moment, but Sequoia’s head snaps up, snorting and blinking her eyes rapidly. “Wazzat smell?” She looks around sharply. “How long was I out?” She finally notices the woman standing in front of her, and her eyes follow up the length of her until meeting the woman’s eyes. “Uhm, hi?”

Apricot smiles down at Sequoia, snaps off her gloves, and offers her hand. “Hello to you, Sequoia. My name is Apricot, an apothecary that operates next to this store and longtime friend with these three. How long’s it been? Seven years? Eight?”

Oak laughs. “Who can say? Keeping track of time is for responsible people, not us.”

Sequoia takes the hand and shakes it. “Good to meetcha.”

“The pleasure is mine. I have something for you.” and she picks up her satchel and removes from it a large, plastic-wrapped brick of green... something. It looks like it’s separated into seven pieces. Apricot peels back the plastic and removes one of the bars and holds it out to Sequoia. “Eat this. It’ll help make you feel better, in time.”

Sequoia eyes it suspiciously, sniffs it, and recoils. “What is it?”

“A nutrient bar of my own design. It can’t replace a balanced diet, but it should have the nutrients you need. It also boosts your immune system, of which you are in very bad need of.”

Sequoia takes it, looks it over, and shrugs before popping it in her mouth. She wretches and only barely manages to not spit it out. She chews as little as she can before swallowing it. “Yech! Couldn’t you have made it taste like it didn’t come from the Business District?”

“No.” She hands Sequoia the rest of the bars. “This should be enough for the next week. Eat a balanced diet, get plenty of sleep, and eat one of these bars at breakfast each day. It will probably help with your sleeping problem.”

Sequoia smacks her mouth, trying to get the taste to wash away. “Probably?”

Apricot shrugs. "I don't have previous cases to compare this to. I'm sure you're well aware of your uniqueness. Keep the magic to a minimum until the week's complete."

Sequoia shakes her head, her elbows propped on her knees. "No can do Apricot, tomorrow's my first show and I'm not gonna miss it for anything."

"Then take the bar six hours before curtain call and drink plenty of strong coffee." She hands a capsule to Oak. "Only use this in case of emergency."

Oak takes the capsule and carefully puts it in a side pocket of the backpack. "Got it. Guess it's gonna be stir fry for the next week."

Lily's eyes go wide as she looks past everyone. A throat clears loudly, pointedly. Apricot, Oak, and Delbruk turn around, and Sequoia peers around Apricot's hip. Apricot's hand goes to her mouth. "Oh my."

You gotta hand it to Turk, he doesn't mess around. He could've easily tried to humiliate Hemlock with a princess dress, but instead chose a sleeveless yellow sundress of plain cotton. Simple, old fashioned, and fits Hemlock quite well. It suits her, in a way, like purple suits blueberries. They aren't purple, but if they were it'd be perfectly fine. She looks to the side, not meeting anyone else's gaze. Turk introduces her with a flourish of his hands. "Ta-da! My greatest work yet!"

“Yeah yeah. Let’s get that picture taken.”

Turk gets a sly grin on his face. “Pic-TURE? I think you mean pic-TURES! And pose a bit, really show yourself off!”

Hemlock hangs her head. “Do I gotta?”

Apricot pouts. “You won’t pose for me?”

“No, I-”

Her mouth quivers. “I’m hurt...”

“Hey, c’mon now.”

“I’m gonna cry... I’m gonna text Tabby and tell her what a jerk you are...”

“Urk. Fine, fine!” Hemlock throws her arms in the air. “Let’s just get this over with already.”

Lily whoops and laughs menacingly. “Give us a bow while you’re at it! A *deep* bow!”

Delbruk, without turning around, addresses Sequoia. “While you were sleeping I put some clothes in the changing room for you, Coy. Try them on, tell me how they make you feel.”

Oak manages to peel her eyes from the spectacle of Hemlock posing and Turk taking instant photo after instant photo and hops up, grabs the top of the changing room door and looks inside. Her tail twitches and her ears



bend back. “Flannel and a suit? A lil on the nose, isn’t it Del?”

Delbruk hmphs and crosses his arms. “Since when have I been wrong?”

“Never, I guess.” Oak hops down and steps aside to give Sequoia access.

“Thanks Del. Be back in a minute.” and Sequoia heads into the changing room.

This is enough to take Delbruk’s eyes from the sight before him. “You’re not going to show each outfit off as you try them on?”

Sequoia peeks her head through the crack of the door. “No? That seems kinda weird. I’ll just make sure these fit and give back what doesn’t.” She tucks her head back into the room and shuts the door.

Delbruk pinches the bridge of his nose and squints. “Another one like Hemlock... You two sure have a knack for picking up boring people.”

Oak laughs. “What can I say? It’s a gift.”

Delbruk strokes his beard. “Altho... That is an interesting tanktop she’s wearing. From those colors and that pattern, is she...”

Oak thinks for a second before getting it. “Nah. Well sort of. Not like us, anyways. It turns out Hell’s complicated.”

Delbruk grins at Oak. “Then she’ll fit right in.”

“Ha! No doubt. She already is.”

“I was talking to Lily a little about this, but why take on a new member now, after all these years?”

Oak scuffs her shoe on the floor and rubs her arm. “There’s a lot of reasons, but... maybe we’re just... lonely.”

Sequoia walks out of the dressing room, dressed exactly the same as before except she’s wearing the forest green flannel over her tank. It hangs loose on her, the cuffs overtaking all but her fingertips. Her kind of shirt. She pulls a few things from the pile, the suit, some more flannel, two pairs of jeans, some pajamas, a few tshirts. She shows the jeans and pajama bottoms to Oak. “What do you think? Can you make a tail hole for these?”

Oak looks the seat over a bit then nods. “Yeah, this’ll be a snap.”

“Awesome, thanks girl.” and Sequoia pecks her cheek. She hands most of the items back to Delbruk. “Here’s what didn’t fit. Too tight and... not my style. Not that they didn’t look good on me, but I can’t really picture wearing a dress or skirt... anywhere. Love the suit tho.”

“Very good.” Delbruk examines Sequoia, putting his hand thoughtfully in front of his mouth again, knuckle tucked under his nose. “Yes... That green flannel especially suits you. Goes well with your skin and hair. And the color and cut of that suit suits you nicely.” He claps, then does a half turn. “Delbruk, you’ve done it again!”

Hemlock comes striding over, slipping her coat back on and fastening her belt. “Congrats, Delbruk, you put a lesbian in flannel and baggy jeans.”

“Oh hush. You have no eye for subtlety and color.” He peers around Hemlock. “How’d the photo shoot go, babe?”

Turk peers down at a stack of photos and shakes them lightly. “They’re coming into focus now... Ah, look!” Everyone peers around Turk to look at the photos he has fanned out.

“Ooh-la-la Lock!” Lily offers her hand to shake. “Bet paid off, good job.” Hemlock doesn’t leave Lily hanging.

Oak’s voice seems distant. “This is just... unsettling. It’s like looking up at the sky and seeing that it’s green. It’s like stepping in a puddle that goes up to your knees. It’s like slicing a watermelon and marinara spills out. You took extras for us, right?”

“But of course.”

Sequoia giggles and shakes her head. "I dunno... Shave those arms and legs and make that skirt go spinny... I would." Hemlock playfully bops Sequoia in the head.

Apricot plucks one of the photos from the stack and pockets it in her not-robos. "If you came knocking on my door at midnight wearing that... I may just let you back in, Hemlock."

Hemlock's mood perks up. "Hey now, seriously?"

"No."

Hemlock droops. "Figures."

Delbruk sighs. "If only you included makeup in the bet..."

"Well, I'm not gonna joke around any further, Lock. Thanks for being a good sport about it." Lily digs in her pockets. "So what's the damage, Del and Apri?"

Delbruk walks behind the counter and punches some figures into an adding calculator with a paper ticker. It's unclear if this is all they could afford, or if it's a personal style choice. "Three over shirts, three tees, slacks, blazer, two jeans, two pajama bottoms and tops... minus family discount... minus 'the troupe is finally expanding' discount... minus the 'Hemlock photo session' discount... then there's the charity discount for literally not owning any other clothes... Let's call it a flat \$42."

Lily whistles. "You sure about that Del? We picked up a good bounty, don't want you taking a bath on us."

Delbruk shakes his head. "Positive. Call it an investment in future sales."

"Thanks Del, it's appreciated." Sequoia peers at the ceiling and puts her finger on her chin again. Creature of habit. "A flat 42 and not 41.99? Or uhm. ... ..41.86?"

Delbruk looks a little surprised at first before shaking his head. "Already forgot you're new around here. Everyone rounds up here in Penny District, except the Boar. Harvey's influence, I imagine. We've got enough pennies as it is without circulating more through the economy."

A snapping sound is heard and everyone turns towards it. Apricot slips on a second glove, snaps it as she pulls it snug and reaches into her satchel. "As for my fee, no charge. Provided..." and she pulls out a long flexible clear tube with a needle at the end of it and several small, empty vials. "...Sequoia allows me to take a blood sample."

Sequoia recoils. "Whoa, what?"

"It's really quite simple. I want to study your blood. See if it's a known blood type, if there's any special properties to it or if it's mundane, if it can give any clarity into your physiology... Promise to share the results with you?"

Sequoia thinks for a long few moments before shrugging. “What the hell. Go with the flow.”

Apricot’s face lights up. “Really? Thank you! Please, have a seat. Oak, hold up this tube. Sequoia, roll up your sleeve, pump your fist, and clench it.”

Sequoia complies. “I have to say, all of you are taking my whole deal even more in stride than the gals.”

Turk covers his face with his hands and turns away from the grisly sight of Sequoia getting pricked with a needle. “Oh honey, you are far from the weirdest person we’ve seen come in here. The whole Hell thing is as weird to me as saying you come from Rainsoaked.”

Delbruk finishes helping Lily cram the clothes in the backpack, some free space being cleared up from giving Delbruk a poster to hang up. “I’m not going to lie and say I don’t have questions or that I’m not curious, but you are a client, and a member of the troupe. That practically makes you family, and family doesn’t pry. Too much.”

Apricot looks on at the blood filling the vials with fascination. “I openly admit my curiosity. If only I could study you in greater detail...”

Sequoia laughs nervously. “I’m... gonna take a pass on that one. Wugh. How much are you taking?”

“Only three vials. Feeling woozy?”

“A lil. I’ll be alright. Beats falling asleep on my feet.”

“Good. Now, if you don’t mind, I’d like to hear what it was like coming up here.”

“Well...” And Sequoia regales Apricot with pretty much the same story she told the gals last night. She talks about how her magic works, and Apricot takes notes. Lily and Hemlock talk with Delbruk and Turk about various things, such as their travels since last time they were in town, the run in with Sunflower, leaving out the part where Sequoia humiliated her of course, and their ideas for the next few shows. Oak chats with Apricot and Sequoia as the blood gets drawn. Seven friends chat like friends talk to each other. Stories are told, explanations are given, bonds form and tighten. There’s no need to detail every moment of a person’s life. Let them have their small world.

## Chapter 9

The gals and Apricot leave the shop, waving behind them. Apricot waves with her free hand, satchel swinging freely in her other, humming on her way back to her shop. The sun hasn’t quite set, but its glow has dulled, its height in the sky lowered, and the street lamps have kicked in. The gals chat briskly with each other, making their way to the boards. They hang the last poster on the bandstand’s

upcoming shows board, seeing as theirs is the next show. A few other groups of people mill about the boards, chatting to themselves, no one paying the others any mind. Some joggers pass by, there's the odd lone person on a bench facing the ocean reading. They pass a stone jetty and watch a person at the end of it laugh madly as water crashes to either side of them. They make their way to a pavilion and cool their heels just as the last wisps of sunlight sink below the horizon behind them. Hemlock sits in the center, facing the ocean, arms spread wide to either side of her and hooked behind the pavilion bench. Oak sits atop the bench's back and passes Lily the marker. Lily sits under Oak, between her legs, and scribbles some doodles on the back behind her. Sequoia snuggles into Hemlock's side and crosses her legs, looking out to the dimly moonlit sea. Feymist in its finest hour.

Oak pats her pockets looking for something, doesn't find it, and snaps her fingers. "Dammit. Meant to bring the harmonica. So what show are we doing next?"

Lily doesn't look up from her doodling. "I dunno. Maybe a concert. We should probably hold off on plays until we get Coy up to speed."

Hemlock shakes her head. "No way, those are always the biggest hits. We should do *The Marksman*. Coy would be *perfect* for Samiel."



Oak twitches her ears, the fur of her tail poking between the slats of the bench's backside, brushing against Lily and Hemlock as she swishes it around. "That's a good point..."

Sequoia leans her head against Hemlock's side and closes her eyes. "Let's see how rehearsal goes tomorrow. You're having me play some bit parts, right?"

Lily caps the marker and passes it back up to Oak, who immediately uncaps it and starts drawing on the support beam she's leaned against. "Yeah, just some background people, like one of King Rafflesia's heralds, a haughty noble that mocks Hibiscus, things like that. The real thing to focus on is the special effects. I'd really rather hold off on The Marksman until you're ready. But you're right, we'll see how tomorrow goes."

Oak's attention is only partly divided by the drawing. "If we don't do The Marksman we should probably do a concert. We at least know Coy can play an instrument."

Lily tilts her head back and looks straight up at her girl, who makes a kissy face down at her. "Yeah... We just did a stunt show... I'm not in the mood for a clown act just yet."

Oak caps the marker and passes it to Hemlock. "Still thinking about earlier?"

"Yeah... She really gets under my skin."

Sequoia peels off of Hemlock and bends forward, looking at the other three. “I have an idea for a show, actually.”

Lily leans forward to look past Hemlock. “Already? I wanna hear about it.”

“Well, maybe not a whole show, maybe more of an after thing. So I was thinking, remember how I made that mattress? What if we ask people to bring raw materials to the next show and at the end or whenever I turn them into something and give it to them?” Hemlock stops writing on the bench and joins Oak and Lily in looking wide eyed at Sequoia. “That way, people will for sure come to the next show.” Hemlock caps the marker and hands it to Sequoia, who stares at it for a few seconds before uncapping it and drawing shapes on the bench’s seat.

Lily thinks for a few seconds and a smile makes its home on her face. “I love it. We could hold a raffle at the start of tomorrow’s show! We draw the name at the end, and ask them to bring raw material the next show!”

Oak looks down into Lily’s eyes, excitement dancing in her own. “And we don’t explain why to get people psyched up and come to the next show to see what we’ll do! Really pump it up as the most unique act on the continent.”

“Well, besides your and my bullet catching act.”

Oak shrugs. "Always room for another." Oak's ears perk and twitch, and her head whips to the left. "Oh shit, Coy, put the marker away quick. We got company. Just act natural."

A uniformed police officer strolls by on his patrol and notices the gals in the pavilion, who all make it a point to not look at him. He stops his patrol and faces all of them and clears his throat. "Hey, can't you read the sign? No loitering."

Hemlock lulls her head back, talking up into the pavilion's rafters. "We're not loitering, we're sitting together in a group."

The cop sighs. "Of four people. That's loitering. No gatherings of more than three people. I'm going to have to ask the four of you to disperse."

Hemlock brings her head up and glares at the cop. "Seriously? Why is this pavilion here if not to sit and talk with your friends? Piss off."

The cop pulls out a pad of paper and a pen. "This pavilion is for people to rest while shopping. It's not for hoodlums to occupy all day and night, scaring the good people going about their day. Do you want a citation?"

Lily looks around and sweeps her arms in both directions. "It's the off season! There's not even anyone here! Most of the shops aren't even open! We've only been

here for like... twenty minutes besides. Don't you have better things to do than harass us?"

"I'm not going to ask you again. Disperse, or you'll all get a citation."

Oak rolls backwards off the back of the bench and lands on her feet. Naturally. "Fine, fine. C'mon, let's keep walking. We can talk about what to do on the way to the Boar."

The cop puts away his pad of paper and clips his pen to his shirt pocket. "That's more like it. Damn punk kids... No respect..." He starts to continue on his patrol.

Sequoia makes a slight nod at the officer. "Shoes're untied, dude."

"Huh?" A popping sound is heard, and the cop faceplants against the boards, his bootlaces tangled up with each other. The pavilion creaks under a sudden and brief burst of wind. The gals all laugh as soon as the cop's face meets the boards, and laugh even harder when he goes to get up again only to faceplant a second time.

Sequoia tries her best to stop laughing and tries to force herself to wear a straight face. "Nevermind, they were tied after all. Why'd you tie them together like that?"

The cop looks down at his boots and untangles them. "Ok, who's the wise guy?"

Sequoia shrugs and smiles. “What are you talking about, we’ve been loitering over here the whole time, remember? Probably just got them tangled clicking your heels together.”

The cop’s face grows red as he ties his boots up properly, stands up, and motions with his arms for everyone to keep walking. “Move along, move along.” He makes sure the gals are well away from the pavilion before continuing his patrol up the boards.

When Hemlock’s sure the cop’s out of earshot, she slaps Sequoia on the back. “Classic. Classic! The old ones are still the best ones.”

Lily’s back in good spirits. “Maybe we should do a clown show after all. You don’t even need to rehearse for that one, Coy. Good work.”

Sequoia smiles wickedly. “Hehe.”

The gals meander their way back up the boards, up Feymist Ave, and through the narrow side streets leading to the Sweaty Boar. They open the door and are surprised to find that the place is hopping. Even more surprising, their usual table in the corner is totally free. Lily looks over to Oak and Sequoia. “Strawberry soda and a mug of water, right?”

Sequoia shakes her head. “Actually, just make mine a regular cup of coffee they brew here.”

“Got it in one for me.” Oak pecks Lily on the cheek. “Thanks love.” Lily dashes over to the table to make sure to claim it, leaving Oak to deal with the host. Lucky for these four, the Boar has never heard of a wait list. Hemlock heads over to the table, and Oak hooks her arm around Sequoia’s and leads her to the bar. “C’mon over to the bar with me, Coy. I’ll introduce you to Harvey.” The two gals weave between tables, a few gals meowing at Oak which she laughs off. They reach the bar and grab the attention of the small, redheaded bartender. “Evening, Liz. Harvey in tonight?”

“Sure is, gorgeous. Lemme guess, a phone call right?”

“Bingo. Make sure to tell him it’s just me and doesn’t have anything to do with the other two.”

“That goes without saying. I’ll get him for ya. One sec.” And she heads into the back.

Sequoia tilts her head at Oak. “What was that all about?”

Oak shrugs and leans her back against the bar. “I’m the only one of us Harvey can tolerate. You get the occasional asshole in here spouting... hateful stuff, and Hemlock and Lily always step up to that. Harvey, he owns the place, and never intended it to be what it is. Y’know, a place for gals like us, so the only thing he truly cares about is keeping the peace. It’s just real close to Penny District and has really great food. Like... the best in town that’s not

a fancy expensive place.” She shrugs again. “I’m assuming. We’ve never been to places like Vicky’s at that big pink hotel on the boardwalk. No steak, no matter how fancy and delicious, is worth \$50. Before we all kind of took it over, the business was flagging. There’s not much traffic here in Feymist during the off season, just locals, and they tend to cook at home or grab fast food. Plus this may be the most out of the way place in all of Feymist. But lots of locals are like us, and wanted a place to gather and socialize. When we took it over, Harvey was so happy to have his business saved that he just went with the flow. Over the years tho, he’s come to resent it I think. Nothing to be done. If he ever tried to change it, we’d just make our own place and put him out of business. We’re reasonable folks, we’re willing to compromise, and him having final say over who gets to be served and how many drinks someone’s allowed to have is one of the compromises we made with him to keep our spot. In the end, Hemlock and Lily tossing assholes out is good for business, so he allows it, but puts limits on their drinking to keep brawls to a minimum. Lily hardly ever drinks more than a single drink, so it’s not a big deal to her, but it’s a major blow to Hemlock. She’s not big for nothing! She can really pack ‘em away! She doesn’t really get drunk, one of those types where beer is basically soda to them, and it’s not like she gets violent when she drinks. I think the limit is more or less to remind Hemlock who’s the boss around here.”

“You got that right, kid.”

Oak jumps, then smooths out her hair as she turns around. “Harvey! Sorry about that, I was lost in conversation. Didn’t even notice you sneak up! Harvey, this is the latest member of our troupe, Sequoia. Sequoia, this is the owner and proprietor of the best place in town, Harvey Rockthroat.”

Sequoia reaches out her hand to the squat, balding, stubbly man behind the bar. He smells faintly of the plate of slop Hemlock ordered earlier, providing insight into why it’s on the menu in the first place. “Pleased to meetcha, sir.”

Harvey shakes her hand. “One of you has manners? Cecilia take me now, it’s the end times. Wait... aren’t you the one from last night? With the bzzzt and all that.” and he holds his hands parallel with each other, mimicking Sequoia’s display from the night before.

“Haha, yeah, that was me. Sorry if I caused a scene.”

Harvey shakes his head. “Not at all. In fact, we’ve been packed since five-thirty with people hoping to see you come back in.”

Oak’s eyes grow wide. “Seriously? That’s pretty impressive, Coy. Usually this place doesn’t pick up til a little later from now.”



Sequoia smiles. "Then I'll think of something to do tonight."

"Just don't go turning my place into one of your shows. Now then, you needed the phone?"

Oak nods. "Yeah, just for five minutes or so for a long distance call."

Harvey holds out his hand. "You know the drill. Cash on the barrelhead."

Oak greases Harvey's palm with two crumpled dollar bills. "That should do it. Thanks Harv."

"Sure thing. You all enjoy your evening." He turns to Liz. "Lemme know if she goes over five minutes."

"Sure sure." She waits for Harvey to saunter into the back before mouthing "I won't." and winking. She reaches down and pulls out an old, heavy rotary phone from under the bar and places it in front of Oak.

Oak mouths "thank you" and smiles warmly at Liz. She puts her finger on the first digit and turns to Sequoia. "This won't take long, Coy. Why don't you go sit with the others and I'll catch up?"

Sequoia crosses her arms and gives a lopsided grin to Oak. "Well, if you think you can handle something as dangerous as a long distance call by yourself, I'll leave you to it. See ya in a few." Oak gives Sequoia's hand a squeeze

and they reach their arms out as Sequoia walks away, lingering on their fingertips for a moment before breaking away. Sequoia makes her way to the table and sits in her usual seat, wrapping her hands around her coffee.

Lily puts down her drink and folds her arms. “And how’s Harvey this evening?”

Sequoia shrugs. “He seems like a nice enough person. Maybe a little stressed out.”

Hemlock rolls her eyes. “What’s so stressful about sitting in the backroom counting money while everyone else does the work? The workers should buy the place out from under him and turn it into a co-op.”

Sequoia brings her coffee to her lips and laughs. “I’ll see if I can’t get word back home to not mess with them too much if they summon one of us to make it happen.” Lily snickers. “Who’s Oak calling, anyways?”

Lily kicks her feet up into Hemlock’s lap and leans back. “My folks. We need them to be able to vouch for you in case you get into trouble.” Lily’s expression goes flat. “Like getting caught defacing a government building by changing the reality of its bricks, or tying a cop’s shoelaces together.”

Sequoia studies her old friend, the rafters. “Vouch for me?”

Lily nods. "Sure. Someone to call for bail and say yeah I know this fool. You'll also need a home address for when you go to get your ID, and they need to say that yes you live there since you have no legal documents like a lease or bills saying you live... well, anywhere."

Sequoia brings her attention back to Lily and smiles. "Thanks, Lil. I appreciate it. I'll be sure to thank your folks when I meet them too."

Oak makes her way over to the table and sits in her usual spot across from Sequoia. "That's taken care of. The folks say hi, they miss us, and hope we're eating right. They also say 'hi to the other two' and are pretty excited to meet you, Coy."

"Not as much as I'm looking forward to meeting them."

Tabby already has her pen and paper out by the time she reaches the table. "Well hey you two, how's it going?"

Sequoia looks up at her and smiles. "Hey Tabby, not too shabby. We missed you earlier."

Tabby shakes her head slowly. "So I heard. Sarah told me aaaaaall about it. Girl, you sure know who to pick fights with."

Sequoia lifts an eyebrow. "You know Sunny? From earlier I figured she only comes in during the day."

Tabby shifts her weight to her other foot. “I cover the day shift for Sarah sometimes. When the place is really dead at night, she’ll sometimes come in. One of those shy types, I suspect. Gonna order everything tonight, or just half of everything?”

Sequoia snickers. “Just a quarter tonight I think. Apricot gave me this gross nutrient bar that’s sitting kinda heavy in my stomach.”

Tabby tsks. “Oh you poor thing, you’ve already met Apricot. Don’t mind her lack of bedside manner, she’s like that with everyone. Good apothecary, bad cook. Still, her remedies really do work. My guess is she does it on purpose to encourage you to eat properly and live well so you don’t have to rely on her gross remedies. So what’ll it be yall?”

Lily kicks it off. “Fish tacos for me.”

Hemlock catches the ball. “Triple decker burg, rare, with onion rings instead of fries.”

Oak takes it to the 20 yard line. “Fish and chips, please.”

Sequoia makes a run for the endzone. “I’ll have-”

Lily folds her arms. “A salad.” Tackled at the 5 yard line.

Sequoia hangs her head and sighs. “Yeah, a salad. And the chili cheese-”

“Mixed grill vegetable plate.”

Sequoia slumps in her seat. “Aw, c’mon Lil, I had that bar. I can get away with some greasy bar food.”

Lily shakes her head, firm in her decision. “Sorry Coy, doctor’s orders. Apri might not have the best decorum, but she knows what she’s talking about.”

Sequoia sighs and picks her head back up. “Fine fine. Spoilsport. Can I at least have some garlic bread?” Lily nods. “And the chocolate mousse for dessert?”

Lily corrects her. “Yogurt parfait.”

Sequoia lets it roll around in her brain. “That works. Thanks Tabby.”

“No problem sugar. Be back in a bit.” Tabby tears off the paper and pockets it before heading to the next table.

Sequoia looks after her as she goes. “Do you only see her here?”

Hemlock cuts off her sip of beer early. “I usually see her late at night, after closing, if you know what I mean, and I think you do.”

Lily rolls her eyes. “We hang out sometimes when she has the night off and we’re not performing, and we see her before and after the shows if she’s not working. Poor gal works all sorts of hours here, hustling to afford to go to college.”

Sequoia recoils a bit. “Why would she want to go to that creepy place?”

Lily folds her arms over the table and rests her head on her arms. “Feymist College is the biggest university on the continent, with a top notch marine biology program I hear. That’s what she’s going for. Feymist College is a lot less creepy when you aren’t lurking in the catacombs underneath it.”

Sequoia shakes her head. “It sucks we couldn’t see her like we saw the folks on Knoll Ave. I feel weird being on the waited-on end of things.”

Oak’s ears twitch and she tilts her head. “Well you’ve literally been up here a day. You’ll get your chance before and after the show tomorrow.”

“I look forward to it.” Sequoia’s finger finds her chin again. “Come to think of it, we never did go to the library today.”

Hemlock snorts. “That’s a good thing to me. The more you remain ignorant about the government the better off you are.”

Sequoia shakes her head. “I should at least learn the basics of it. Like what’s this Coalition thing? You’ve mentioned them a few times.”

Oak joins Lily on the table. “So back one hundred and fifty years ago, Arclight waged war on the rest of the

continent, looking to conquer it. Individually, the countries didn't stand a chance. They were losing ground left and right, and it was looking pretty grim. That's when all the different countries decided to pool their military into one force and share tactical information with each other freely. It's only through that agreement that they reached a stalemate with Arclight, who signed a treaty to stay within their borders, never to venture out, provided the rest of the continent left them alone. That treaty was the basis for the Coalition, a conglomerate of every country on the continent except for Arclight. To this day, all countries share military, state secrets, economy, allow free and unfettered travel between each other, and instituted a continental identification program that tracks each citizen and gives them one ID that can be used the continent over. In function, the continent is one big country and the countries within it are more like states. There's still cultural divisions, as there always will be, but the division between countries have all but been erased. There used to be dozens of countries, but now there's only five. Pakel to the southeast, which is where we are now, Brezitella to the northeast, which is where we're from, Kartoffel to the southwest, Nuss to the northwest, and Hapke in the center, which is the seat of the government."

Sequoia chews it over for a few moments. "Why tho? Why not just have one big country if they're all going to share economies, military, and information? Seems like

they already started homogenizing, why not go all the way?"

Oak lifts a hand, waves it, and lets it flop to the table. "Each country still has its own customs, laws, and local governments. I think more than anything it's just to preserve culture. The borders are essentially meaningless, and culture blurs around those borders, but people keep up the pretense out of fear of total homogeneity. They fear they'll lose their way of life if we all got absorbed into one big continental country."

Sequoia sloshes her coffee around her cup for a moment before taking another sip. "I guess I get that, just seems weird, is all. If the Coalition benefited everyone so greatly, why did it take the war with Arclight to unite them? Why wouldn't they just have done that from the start?"

Oak sits up and shrugs. "Well, the only reason the Coalition formed to begin with was because of the war, remember? We never would've dreamed about uniting the continent if it wasn't for Arclight. We'd still be a bunch of countries dividing ourselves off from everyone else for petty reasons. We needed the combined strength of all those disparate states to fight them back. From there, it's all about fear of Arclight coming back."

"And no one's left or gone into Arclight for those one hundred and fifty years, right?"



“Right. There’s no entrance or exit, no ladder can reach the top of their wall, and the airspace above it is a strict no-fly zone.”

Sequoia leans back in her chair and shakes her head, clutching her cup of coffee to her. “None of that really makes sense to me. I don’t think Arclight even exists.”

Lily sits up, her face twisted up in confusion. “Huh?”

Sequoia puts down her cup, hands still wrapped around it. “Think about it. If people are so resistant to unification and squabble amongst each other as much as you say, doesn’t it seem like immediately after the war they’d disband? Arclight built an impassable wall and signed a treaty and all that. Isn’t it strange that such a shaky alliance would not only endure but strengthen in one hundred and fifty years?”

Lily tilts her head. “Well...”

“And no one has even so much as seen an Arclighter since? It just seems unlikely. You’d think in one hundred and fifty years they would’ve reached out in *some* capacity. How can a country survive that long without at least trade? One hundred and fifty years is a long, long time. Everyone from back during the war is long dead and gone, including the rulers of Arclight. Regimes change, people yearn for community and wouldn’t stand for having their border corked up from the rest of the world

for so long. It just seems like a convenient boogeyman to make sure the Coalition stays in power.”

Hemlock turns her empty beer mug upside down and laughs. “Now you’re speaking like a properly paranoid citizen of Windswept. I love it. All that creepy data collection they do for each citizen and the fact no force on Earth can challenge the Coalition? The real fear is the Coalition’s fear of losing control. I wouldn’t put it past them to block off an entire 1/8th of the continent just to keep up appearances. They probably keep all sorts of weird state secrets and conduct creepy experiments behind that wall.”

Lily huffs, letting all her air out in one sharp, quick breath. “Great, now look what you’ve done.”

Oak’s ears droop and she shakes her head sadly. “We’ll never hear the end of this now... Way to feed her paranoia, Coy.”

“Happy to be of service.” Sequoia’s smug smile turns to one of wonder. “So you’ve read the guild’s bylaws, Oak. What’re they really all about?”

“The Crossguards?” Oak rolls her eyes to the inside of her brain, searching the archive. “Well, they’re an adventuring guild, as I’ve mentioned. They operate on three basic principles. The first declares them above the borders of nations and continents, and states that their duty is the peace and safety of the citizens of the world.”

She shrugs. "Which doesn't matter since everyone on this continent is already free to go country to country due to the Coalition. Guess it helps if you go to another continent. The second has to deal with their primary mission. 'If a civilian's safety or freedoms are threatened, it is the Crossguard's duty to come to their aid.'"

Sequoia puts a finger to her chin. "But aren't they cops? Don't cops take away people's freedom?"

Hemlock claps. "Exactly, you're getting it. The whole organization is a fraud."

Oak shakes her head. "They don't usually make actual arrests, they just investigate and turn the information over to the police. If someone's doing something that violates Principle Two, that's usually when they act in an emergency capacity. They still need the police's involvement to make any charges stick."

Lily closes her eyes and folds her arms in front of her. "Basically, they're paid vigilantes with a special badge."

Oak nods. "Pretty much. And finally, their last principle defines their authority, limiting it to just personal affairs. They are forbidden from interfering with matters of the state. That is, if a country decides to pass some oppressive new law, the Crossguards can't do anything about it, since it's not their job to determine the way a country's governed. There's been a few times they've gotten involved in corruption cases, and there was a

famous coup attempt that they stopped, but generally speaking they have no say in the way a country's governed."

"But... what if it's the government who's taking away people's safety and freedoms?"

Hemlock wraps her arm around Sequoia's shoulder. "See? You're getting it. They're a sham, tools of oppression used by the state for cases where the police aren't enough."

Sequoia polishes off her coffee. "No kidding. I can see why Sunny is the way she is. She probably buys into this contradictory garbage. Got the poor gal's brain all twisted up."

Hemlock removes her arm and folds it in front of her. "Which makes her all the more dangerous. Nothing more dangerous than a true believer." Tabby comes by with a tray full of food and sets it out in front of everyone, swapping Hemlock's empty mug with a fresh one and topping off Sequoia's coffee before hurrying over to the next table.

Sequoia looks down at her salad and half-heartedly spears some on her fork. "So uhm. Are the three of you... famous?" Everyone's mouths are too full to answer, but with the way they're all looking at Sequoia, you get the impression that they wouldn't know how to respond anyways. "It's just that you said Sunflower's super famous,

right? She saved the world and all that. But she seems to have more than a passing familiarity with the three of you and you bump heads with her a whole lot, right?” She shrugs, continuing to look down at her salad so she can make sure to get a crouton on each bite. “Just seems like if you were nobodies she wouldn’t even notice you.”

Lily rolls the thought in her head as she munches on a taco. “Well... I definitely wouldn’t say we’re famous. I’d say we’re well-known here in Feymist, and that we have a following in Yama and Brechdan, but most places forget we were even there the past six months. We only run into her in Feymist, so maybe that’s why? It’s a small town, and we’re kinda easy targets. Cops love finding an easy target to bully. We’re not the only troupe that travels around, either. The Framboise Theater Company, those guys are famous. They have like, thirty members or so, and travel by train or airship, renting out moving vans to haul their supplies to their venues. It’s a huge deal when they visit a place, and they set up for months at a time. People will travel from hundreds of miles around just to see them perform. They’re top of the game, but they share one thing in common with all troupes besides us: they charge for their shows.” Lily shrugs and bites another taco, spilling taco leavings all over the plate. “I mean I get it, people gotta eat, people deserve to be paid for their labor. I don’t hold it against them. It’s not even like we don’t charge to stand out, it just goes against our beliefs. Not like two dropouts and a vagabond can stand out really anyways.

We're well-known here because Feymist just sorta... gets us."

"Dropouts?"

"Yeah. Oak and I have been doing this for eight years, and we're only twenty three. Hemlock's been doing it for seven and she's twenty five. We dropped outta school when we ran away. We were almost done anyways, and we figure we can just learn what we wanted on the road. Who cares about institutional knowledge, who needs it? There's so many resources you can use to educate yourself if you want, and so many things to learn about that you would have no clue about if you only learned at school. As if a piece of paper saying you graduated is proof of any intelligence at all. Pffft. If you ask me, it's just a certificate of endurance. All school is is a way to ready people to enter the workforce, perpetuating society's need for cheap, unquestioning labor. Everyone gets taught the same things the same way, enforcing conformity through punishment and fear. You can hardly even get a job if you don't graduate high school, making the vast majority of people too afraid to so much as step out of line. Not to mention that all your offenses during school end up in a permanent record that employers have access to. It's a system of oppression with some of the deepest roots in society. They educate you juuuuust enough to be useful to them by grinding out your life doing meaningless labor whose only end results are destroying the environment

and making someone else impossibly rich. Whatever. We're smart enough to not fall for it." Lily scoops up some of the fallen taco leavings and overstuffs another taco with them, which then drops a clump of leavings when she bites into it. "It's one of the many reasons our shows are free for all. Even the 'uneducated' and jobless deserve entertainment and art."

Sequoia tears off a chunk of garlic bread and chews on it, washing away the finished salad and bridging the gap between it and her mixed grill plate. "I... didn't expect topsider schools and ours to be so similar. All school is for us is a way to ready you for whatever career you were created for. Who even knows who benefits from that in the end. My guess is Cecilia. All these systems of control, everyone so afraid to step out of line, all of the careers totally meaningless, it's all designed to keep us in the same state forever, meaning we're trapped and Cecilia doesn't have to deal with us anymore. It seems like it's the same up here, institutional learning and job training that keeps the status quo so the people on the top can lead lives of luxury."

Hemlock stuffs the last of her burger in her mouth and talks between bites. "As for me, my village didn't have a school. We all learned a trade from a master, and lived in harmony with the environment. Don't need stuff like world history and social studies for that. The closest we ever got to school is learning how to read and write, cuz

that's just useful to living in the world. Each Sunday, the elder would gather the children up and have us copy text from books, teaching us the meaning of each word and about sentence structure."

Sequoia stops playing with her mixed grill plate and takes the plunge. She tilts her head in surprise, and eats with more gusto. "So what trade were you learning?"

"Blacksmithing. My father was our village's blacksmith and damn good at it too. I'm ok at it, definitely out of practice, but he was on another level. He'd pound out weapons for hunting parties, shoes for horses, tools for other people to do their trade, nails, you name something made out of metal, he made it. The village relied on him, as he relied on the village, creating a sustainable loop that skipped the rest of the world's need for money. There's no need for money when you live off the land and support each other, as we should be doing anyways. Money's like school, just another system of oppression and control." Hemlock hooks an onion ring around her finger and spins it. "It's addicting, too, once you get a taste of it you just want more and more and will stoop to lower and lower levels to get it. Take the Loser Board for instance. Most Freelancers constantly grind out their lives working unsustainable hours to get as much money as they can. I dunno if it's the delusional belief that you can get your working done and out of the way when you're young, which is a waste of youth anyways, or if it's just plain



simple desire to raise your status and have luxuries, but it's a trap that's very common in the gig economy. Especially amongst people of our generation, who aren't settling down and getting married and buying houses and shit. The only people who're free from that addiction are the ones who rely on it the most for survival. Kinda ironic, ain't it? You work two jobs to be able to afford to live in a home and feed your family, never having any money for luxuries like seeing the Framboise Theater Company or eating out at the Sweaty Boar, but you're also some of the most honest and respectable people out there. They don't crawl over each others' corpses to get more money, they support each other and know the pain of need, softening their hearts enough to see the misery the scramble for ever more money causes. And those are also the most powerless and vulnerable people in society. Well, except for the homeless and incarcerated folks. It's as heartbreaking as it is ironic. That's another reason our shows are free for all. People who break their backs to survive deserve a break from the grind."

Sequoia licks her lips as she gets to the real highlight of the meal, her yogurt parfait. She savors a spoonful, closing her eyes and tilting her head back and forth. "So... what about the three of you? You're Freelancers and here we are, at the Boar, enjoying a meal out. If you weren't famous, you wouldn't be able to get enough money in tips to do this. If you're not famous, then you Freelance to enjoy luxuries."

Oak mixes up her fries with the taco leavings, jabs a mass with her fork, and feeds it to Lily. “We’re not saying we’re above people working two jobs, and we recognize that we fall into the same traps others do. You can’t help it when your only means of survival are odd jobs and tips. We basically only do stuff like this in Feymist, Yama, and Brechdan because they’re the only places we can get enough work and tips to take a break and enjoy things like eating at the Boar. If money’s going to exist, then it should be circulated amongst people who will do good with that money, like paying for Tabby’s college or creating a safe space for gals like us or letting Delbruk, Turk, and Apricot lead lives they enjoy instead of working in an office. When tips are good, we enjoy ourselves. When we Freelance, we survive. Not like we want to Freelance to survive, we’d rather just live off tips, but since we *aren’t* famous that’s not possible. Freelancing lets us stay mobile, ensuring we don’t get stale and can retain our way of life. If we stayed in Feymist year round, we wouldn’t be special and no one would look forward to us visiting again, we’d just be an everyday fixture and taken for granted. We *could* forgo Freelancing, but then that’d probably mean we’d have to stop performing and somehow find ‘real’ jobs in order to survive. Meaning we’d have to put down roots in one spot, and that’s just... unbearable to us.

“So we let ourselves fall into that trap of the gig economy so we can pursue our passions. We aren’t hoarding money, tucking it away into a retirement fund

like most Freelancers, we're not even trying to make and blow a lot of it. We just want enough to live happy, fulfilling lives in a way that's meaningful to us. If that means having to Freelance to enable that, so be it. There's worse ways to support yourselves. Ideally, we wouldn't have to deal with money and could just perform. But you need money to buy food, the fuel that lets us travel and sustain our way of life is expensive, not even Delbruk and Turk can afford to give away clothing, and Apricot can't accept demon blood for everything. Theoretically, we could just post up on unclaimed land and become farmers, toiling the land for food and surviving off the wild, but then we wouldn't be able to live our dreams. Life's about sacrifice, there's no getting around it. Even the ultra rich and powerful sacrifice, usually their soul to the altar of wealth. No one with money and power is a good person, or they wouldn't be wealthy or powerful to begin with, they'd use their influence and wealth to eliminate 'need'. That's the joke, get it? *Everyone* could live their dreams and not have to take jobs they hate, and still be able to enjoy going out for a meal with friends or taking in a show, if the haves had souls and shared what they had with the have-nots. No one would be hungry, or need to answer to a landlord, or have to choose between staying sick or going bankrupt if money was redistributed properly. But a handful of people addicted to wealth ensures that's not possible. And all us free of the addiction to wealth support this handful of people, enabling their oppression of us.

You *have* to laugh at that, or else fall into an abyss of depression.

“Life’s a joke, and we’re the punchline. Once you truly realize how powerless you are, you can see the comedy in it. Then you’re free to do whatever you want, so long as you play the game when you have to. That’s where we fall. Clowns who get the joke, laughing at the absurdity of reality.” Oak shrugs. “Of course, there’s people fighting against all of that and trying to change the world for the better. Good luck to them, the world needs that. When someone makes a commune outside of society’s systems, some of the punch is taken out of the joke. When protestors reveal the joke to normal folks, the joke gets a little more stale. When the abuse people and the land suffer at the hands of corporations is exposed, the joke feels like it was never funny to begin with. That’s the thing. No comedian stays at the top forever, and there’ll always be new blood to remind them of that. Someday, there’ll be a new hot comedian, and maybe they’ll tell a different joke.”

Sequoia scrapes the dish to get the last bit of yogurt and granola. “May we all live to hear that joke.”

Hemlock raises her mug and takes a swig. “Here here.”

“So... Why does Sunflower know so much about the three of you anyways? You never really answered my

question, you just rambled about philosophy.” Sequoia laughs. “Not that I mind, mind you. I love hearing your thoughts on the world. It’s as comforting as it is entertaining. I get what you’re laying down, and I’m into it. I definitely found the place I belong. The three of you really are good storytellers. Bad at deflection, tho.”

Oak laughs and shakes her head. “Damn, I really thought we got you that time. There’s not much to say, honestly. We don’t really know why she harasses us? Maybe it’s not specific to us, maybe she does it to other people, altho it really does feel like it’s just us. The first time we ever butted heads with her was when we took a monster extermination job six years ago. There was a pack of these winged lion-like creatures with shark-like teeth attacking travelers on a nature path. We tracked them down, found where their nest was, and were going over a strategy on how to. Uhm. Finish the job. That’s when Sunflower leapt out of a tree and dispatched all three of them with just three quick swipes of her sword. Hemlock was furious. Do we like hunting monsters? Hell no. Did we need that bounty to get groceries and make it to the next town? Yep. They got in each other’s faces, Hemlock screaming at Sunflower about having dibs when without a word Sunflower just punched her in the gut, knocking the wind out of her, and walked away. It’s been downhill since. Part of the reason we rarely Freelance in Feymist is because she’ll sometimes show up on the job and try to spoil it for us. Like she did when Hemlock was going to do

that carpentry job five years ago. She knows we're in town because of our posters, so she probably watches the Loser Board. I really do think it's just because we're easy, obvious targets. Performing basically paints a big red target on us. Our lives are literally us saying 'hey, look at me!' Sunflower may be famous, but even famous people need to find someone lower on the pole than them. As for the rest..." Oak shrugs and waves her hand dismissively. "She's not dumb, she can put two and two together. We've been coming to Feymist since the beginning, so if she's paying attention even a little bit she'll know what's up. Now that we know she goes to the Boar, she probably picked up a rumor as well. At least she's never insulted us for that, only my skill. Or lack thereof. Even asked Hemlock for pronouns before laughing in her face at how much of an idiot oaf she is. Did the same for me six years ago when she caught me in the university's dry dumpster looking for books. She's never let me live dumpster diving down, but she's... oddly respectful of that other stuff. What can you do. I guess no one's all bad."

At this point, two girls have made their way to the gals' table. One seems rather shy, but the other crosses her arms in front of her and stands straight. "Excuse me. I hope I'm not interrupting."

Oak laughs nervously. "Nah, we were pretty much done."

The confident girl nods. "It's just that..." and she looks down at Sequoia. "Are you the witch that made the tray float last night?"

Her friend covers her face with her hands. "Sam! That's kinda rude! I'm so sorry you four. She can't help herself."

Sequoia laughs and grins up at Sam. "It's alright. Yep, it's me, I'm the witch."

Sam's eyes slowly shift to the left and right. "Can you like... do other stuff?"

"Sure, I can do lotsa stuff. You have anything in particular in mind?"

Sam shakes her head. "Not really, I just missed out and was hoping for a show."

Her friend wilts, embarrassment plain on her face. "Sam! Jeez, learn some tact!"

"Nah, it's cool, I was planning on it anyways and this is a good segue. Tell ya what, Sam and..."

The shy girl smiles nervously. "Abigail."

"Sam and Abby. I'll do something... if you promise to come to our show tomorrow and tell all your friends to come as well. I guarantee you'll see something as cool as I'm about to show you. Well," Sequoia laughs. "Maybe. I don't really know what topsiders consider impressive."

Sam shrugs. "We were planning on it anyways."

Abigail tilts her head. "Topsiders?"

Sequoia thinks for a few moments. "Hm... Do either of you have a match or some other source of fire?"

Lily gets a worried look on her face. "Coy?"

Sequoia shakes her head. "Sorry, I know that story last night was kind of special for the three of you, but I think I want to spread it around to other topsiders. You don't mind, right?"

Lily puts her hand on her chin. "You know the risks involved with talking about that stuff, right?"

"Yeah, but I figure this is probably a good crowd to test the waters."

"Well... If you're sure, then I say go for it."

Sequoia looks up at her potential audience. "So how about it, Sam or Abby? Gotta light?"

Sam reaches into her pocket and pulls out a plain white lighter. "I got a lighter."

"You're not religious, are you?" Both girls shake their heads. "Then let's see that flame." Sam ignites the lighter, and Sequoia reaches out, pulling an impossibly large amount of fire from such a tiny source. A ball of fire hovers above her hands before shaping into a tiny, winged



demon. Like the tray last night, all activity in the tavern ceases. People get out of their seats to look around the two gobsmacked girls. They manage to get enough of their composure back to stand to the side so others can see. A small crowd starts to form around the gals' table, and Liz stands on a milk crate so she can look over the bar and at the spectacle unfolding. "Long before what is now known as the Reveal, there was once a mischievous race of sprites..."

## Chapter 10

The moon, having punched in for the night, takes over the sun's shift. It hangs high and illuminates the sky as best as it can. Some workers are more efficient than others. Four gals exit the Sweaty Boar Tavern, trading the glow of overhead lighting for moonlight. When the door opens, a burst of cheering and howling ushers them into the night. They wave and the gal whose hair matches the night sky takes a bow. They begin to traverse the series of side alleys and roads from the Sweaty Boar to Feymist Avenue, subconsciously, as if being lured there. Oak shakes her head and works her thumbs through the holes she's worn into the cuffs of her hoodie. "In all our years, I don't think we've ever heard the Boar get that quiet. That

story was even better the second time, save for the atmosphere of course.”

Sequoia spins in place, still riding high on the rush of the crowd. “Maybe I should’ve given them that encore! Ah well. They’ll have a chance to hear it again when we do it as a show. If uhm, the three of you are cool with that.”

Lily grins broadly, trying to conceal her excitement. “Of course we are, altho we should try to adapt it into a play. We could have you do the trick with the fire and narrate while we act out scenes! That’ll be the best of both and be a smash hit. An original play, not a reworking of some old one!”

Oak copycats Sequoia’s way of thinking, her eyes rolling moonwards and her finger on her chin. “So long as we’re mindful of the places we show it, considering it’s blasphemy and all.”

Hemlock pretends to look at a watch she doesn’t have. “I’m all for it. There’s still time before we should head back. Wanna head to the beach?”

“Yeah, I’d like that. ...Oh actually!” Oak’s ears twitch and her tail swishes rapidly. “I have an idea! Let’s stop by that convenience store on Knoll on the way there.” The gals talk and laugh on the way there, and Oak ducks in for a moment leaving the others in the avenue. It isn’t long before Oak comes back out and hands a cellophane wrapped item to each of them.

Hemlock grins broadly. “Oh hell yes. Good thinking girly.”

Sequoia looks at it and reads the packaging. “Glow Stick (Gamma Green). What is it?” They all start heading down Feymist Ave again, nearing the boards.

Lily waves hers. “I got Radon Red. Pffft. Radon doesn’t even have a color. They just wanted a cool alliterated name.”

Oak hangs back with Sequoia. “It’s what it says on the tin, it’s a stick that glows the color shown on the packaging. Mine’s Pulsar Purple. You bend it til it snaps, shake it up, and it starts glowing that color. Wait til we’re on the beach tho.”

Hemlock flips hers in the air and makes a silly pose as she catches it. “Today’s color is Uranium Yellow. Guess they ran out of ideas and went off sound rather than spelling. Kinda clever in its way.” Hemlock leads them down the boardwalk steps and down onto the beach. She tears off the packaging, and Oak slips the backpack off her back, setting it down in the sand, opens her glow stick, and puts the cellophane into the backpack, motioning for the others to do the same.

Sequoia looks down at the pale, raw glow stick. “So I have to snap this glow stick thing in half?”

Oak shakes her head. "Not in half. Just bend it until you hear and feel a snap, then shake it vigorously until it glows."

Sequoia bends her stick, but doesn't feel a snap. She tries again, bending harder, but nothing happens. "... ....I can't get it to go."

Hemlock makes the universal hand signal for "gimme". Hemlock bends it, snapping the barrier holding back the chemical reaction. She hands it back to Sequoia. "Now shake it up." Three more snaps, the sounds of liquid sloshing around four tubes, and soon everyone's stick is glowing brightly.

Sequoia's awed expression is illuminated green. "Whoa... this is so pretty. How does it work?"

Hemlock shrugs. "Hell if I know. It ain't important. What is important is this." She swings it by the included string rapidly, a yellow blurry circle to her side, and she sends it sailing through the air, running underneath it and catching it. "Hey Lil! Go long!" and she swings it by the string again, hurtling it towards Lily.

Lily runs after it, leaping up to snatch it out of the air just as she throws hers to Hemlock. She falls to the sand and rolls before getting back up to her feet. "Trade ya!" and she throws the glowing yellow stick back at Hemlock, sailing past the red one coming back at her.

Sequoia's transfixed by hers, only snapped out of her trance by Oak holding her own up to Sequoia's to see what color the combined light makes. Oak swings hers in a circle and throws it straight into the air, missing each attempt to catch it. Sequoia just swings hers around, marveling at the way the light blurs the faster you move it. The gals continue on in this way for a long time, swinging and throwing and catching and exhausting their ideas on what to do with a glowing stick on a string. Eventually, their colors dull. Sequoia holds the dimming light close to her eyes. "Aw, is that it? Or can we snap them again?"

Oak shakes her head and slips hers into her pocket. "Unfortunately not. The chemical reaction that causes the glow ends after awhile. I've always been told you can wrap them in foil and stick them in the freezer to make them last longer, but I've never gotten that to work."

"That was tons of fun. They were so pretty against the pitch blackness of the beach and sea..."

Lily hangs the fading light around her neck. "During the summer, you'll see dozens of people at night swinging these around and nearly every store sells 'em. It's too bad we don't have a kite on us, you can tie one of these to the kite's string and see it dance in the night sky amongst the stars. It's so relaxing and peaceful. This really is my favorite place on the continent."

Hemlock tosses hers up to a trash can on the boards, pumping her fist when she hears the clang of it going in. “Not every day can be like this tho. C’mon everyone, we should get back to the van. We got rehearsal tomorrow and we should get up extra early.”

“Aw... Well, I’ve heard enough stories tonight. I guess we can start a bonfire and tell stories another night.” Sequoia wraps her arms around Lily and Oak’s sides as they walk up the steps to the boards, her voice getting distant as they walk up Feymist Ave. “Uhm, is it alright if I sleep with the two of you tonight? I mean, y’know, not like that but like... just cuddle up. I’ll be on the outside so I don’t get between the two of you, promise.”

Nobody noticed the shining pair of eyes blinking from under the boards. The head holding them hangs low, and the eyes close. Sunflower steps out from under the boards, shakes her hung head, then looks up at the moon being reflected off the crashing waves. She turns and heads up the steps, observing from a distance.

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The sun relieves the moon, the sunlight stretching above the horizon as it starts its shift. The moon lingers, barely visible in the early morning sky, making sure the sun gets into position. Once it decides that the sun will make it through another day after all, it disappears over the horizon. Lily peels her eyes away from the spectacle

and pours some batter in the pan, making sure it coats the bottom evenly. “So I was thinking, Coy. You got that suit from Threadful Portents, right? I think you should wear it and sit at the donation box until it’s time to start the show.”

Sequoia grips her empty mug to her as she shuffles to the pot of coffee. “Won’t I need to get in costume and in position for the show?”

Lily shakes her head, unhooks the percolator from its place above the fire, and pours some coffee in Sequoia’s mug. “Not for a few scenes. There’s a whole scene with Hibiscus and the baker before you even have anything to do. That’ll give you plenty of time to get into costume. We’ll work on fast changes later. So how about it? You can hand out raffle tickets, get to know people, talk to people other than us and the people we show you. Expand your worldview a bit.”

Sequoia takes a sip and nods her head slowly. “Yeah... Yeah I’m into it. People won’t see me as too stuffy in a suit, will they? Maybe I should just wear my normal flannel.”

Oak puts down the guitar she’s strumming and takes a sip of her own coffee, the temperature finally cool enough for her tongue. “Nah, I agree with wearing the suit. This is theater, and even tho we have a really casual crowd, we’re still putting on a show. Wearing a suit is part of the theatrics.”

“Hm... I bet I could fit that metal sunflower I made in my lapel. That would look cute I think.”

Hemlock looks up from her whittling. “Think she’ll actually come?”

Lily flips the huge pancake. “Nah, she’s never come before. She’ll paint over the wall.” She hands everyone an empty plate. “Her loss. This is gonna be a show to remember. Didja remember to pick up the script, Coy?”

Sequoia waves a somewhat thick stack of paper at Lily. “I’ve flipped through it a bit. I’ve already got some ideas on what kinda effects to use. Like this scene where Hibiscus decides to accept stolen money to pay rent. When she’s weighing that decision, I could create loud heartbeats in everyone’s ears. Or when she finally leaves the bakery to turn to a life of crime, I could make the sound of thunder rolling in the distance and some flashing lights in the sky.”

Lily grins to herself, and flips the pancake off the pan and onto a plate. She divides it up into four pieces and distributes a quarter to everyone before pouring in some more batter. “Hell yeah. We’ve got some ideas we’d like to shoot your way too, if that’s ok.”

Sequoia smiles warmly down at her cup of coffee. “Yeah, of course. I’d like that, actually. Man, I’m so excited! Think I’ll be ready in time?”



Oak sits beside Sequoia and leans against her. “No doubt. How about we go over your lines while the rest of breakfast cooks?”

Sequoia lets out her breath before popping some pancake in her mouth. “Phew. I was hoping you were gonna say that. So I come in near the beginning of act one, right?”

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Time slips away as the gals get Sequoia up to speed and rehearse the play. Sequoia nearly drowns in coffee as she practices the timing and intensity of the effects they’ve collectively decided on. She catches on quick, her confidence growing with each reading and each effect created. Finally comes the time all four of them have been dreading: hauling the costumes, props, and backdrop pieces from the van to the bandstand. It’s a long and arduous trek, and they need to make a second trip to get it all. By the time everything’s where it needs to be, it’s about an hour before curtain call. Lily unfolds a card table and stands it up in a spot no one can help but pass if they want to see the show. “Right here is perfect. We’re gonna go meet with the stage manager and start putting up the set. Don’t worry about not helping, we’ve been doing this a long time. We’ll teach you how to strike everything and set everything up later. I just want you to enjoy meeting new people and get a feel for our crowd.”

Sequoia unfolds a seat and places it at the table and sits down. Oak comes by with the donation box. The donation box has a sign on it with clear, scrolly handwriting that reads “Support independent art, keep us fed!” and underneath that is a smaller sign with rough, sloppy handwriting. “Or pay us fuel money to leave if you hate us!” Besides the two signs, the front is clear plastic, but the sides and top are covered in stickers of all kinds. Anti-capitalism slogans, art from independent artists, ironic advertisements for products long since discontinued, one advertising the Boar. Oak slips a few crumple bills into the box. “It’s better if it doesn’t look empty. Don’t be nervous. Just be casual and act like you usually do and you’ll be fine. Remember, if you get any static, just call for me and I’ll be able to hear you. Then Hemlock or Lily will clobber whoever’s stepping.”

Hemlock puts down a roll of tickets, a pen, and a large empty mason jar. She scribbles “Free raffle!” on it with a marker. It matches the handwriting of the sign asking for fuel money. “Don’t go falling for some floozy and running off in the night. Without telling us first, I mean.”

Sequoia laughs and fiddles nervously with the metal sunflower in her lapel. “Pffftt haha yeah right. Thanks, gals. I’ll be ok, do your thing.” The other three jog off to hurriedly put together the sets. After a few minutes, the early birds start trickling in. A few people pass Sequoia by without paying her any mind, but most stop and at least

acknowledge the donation box. Mostly, they sign up for the raffle.

A couple brings their child up. “Is this where we get tickets for the show?”

“No tickets necessary, friend.” Sequoia nods at the donation box and roll of tickets. “Altho if you want to enter our raffle or drop some spare change in our tip jar, this would be the place.”

One of them reaches into their pocket and gives their child some coins. Sequoia lowers the donation box so the child can drop it in the box and smiles and waves at them. The child drops the coins in the box and shyly hides behind their parent’s leg. “Oh, a raffle? What’s the prize?”

Sequoia puts the box back atop the table and folds her hands, smiling up at them. “You’ll have to come to our next show in two days to find out. Guaranteed it’ll knock your socks off. Unless you win, then we’ll come clean tonight so you can be prepared to receive your prize in two nights’ time.”

“What a cool idea. One for each of us, please.” Sequoia plucks three tickets from the roll and hands them a pen. They drop the tickets in the jar and take a seat.

The main crowd starts pouring in. Even Delbruk, Turk, Apricot, and Tabby show up. They chat with Sequoia a bit, but generally want to grab a seat before they’re all taken,

and to let Sequoia get to know the people in the crowd more. Sequoia chats with people, laughing off questions about her appearance by saying she's from the deep south, and eases into the flow of people. For never having done this before, she's a natural. The crowd is an odd mix of what appear to be just average people with their families, the elderly, visibly queer folks, and obvious outcasts, who bring their own chairs and beach blankets to sit on the bit of lawn stretching in the very back of the area in front of the bandstand. Sequoia talks to them all, immersing herself in Feymist culture. It's when some people wearing studded leather jackets with album covers on the back and chains are talking to her that she looks around them. "Man, she looks *pissed*."

"Who looks pissed?" One of them turns around and yelps, then taps the others on the shoulders, who in turn give a quick and curt farewell before hurrying to the furthest point from this scene. Sunflower walks up to the table, stopping a fair distance from it. Her eyes dart as she surveys the scene, a scowl on her face and her arms folded in front of her.

Sequoia breathes deep and lets it out slow. "(Ok. Just like I practiced.) Hey Sunny, I was hoping to see you here. Glad you could make it." She makes a show of glancing at the donation box. "Alms for the poor? Psych, it's a tip jar. You don't have to put anything in it if you don't want, it's a free show." She winks and smiles at Sunflower. "I'm giving

you our friends and family rate. Wanna enter our raffle? Weird mystery prize by yours truly if you win.”

Sunflower puts her hand on her hip and shifts all weight to the opposite foot. “Change them back, demon.”

Sequoia puts her finger on her chin and looks up, trying not to meet the warrior’s gaze. “‘Change them back’? Change what back?”

“I’m not here to play games. Change those bricks back to how they were.”

“Ooooh, change *those* bricks back.” Sequoia strokes her chin and closes her eyes, a sly grin on her face. “Hm... I dunno Sunny... That’s tricky...”

“It’s Sunflower, not ‘Sunny’.”

“It’s Sequoia or Coy, not ‘demon’.”

At this point, Sunflower looks more annoyed than pissed. It could be both. “I gave you *one* chance and you blew it an hour later on a stupid joke. I don’t care what you prefer to be called.”

Sequoia recoils as if Sunflower had swung a fist at her. “Hey now... I may be a demon but I still have feelings, y’know? I know you know that, you’re real smart and have a big heart.” She hangs her head and talks into her chest. “You don’t have to call me Coy or even Sequoia. I’ll change those bricks back tomorrow. First thing after breakfast,

promise. That'll give me a chance to say my goodbyes. Then you can kill me I guess. Blew my chance, right? Just leave the other three alone, ok. They have nothing to do with me being here or what I did. Please?" Sunflower's expression doesn't soften, but it doesn't harden either. She takes her hand off her hip and lets the arm hang free. Sequoia picks her head back up and gives a slight smile. "But y'know... If you really thought I blew my chance... you wouldn't be here. You would've iced me at any other better opportunity between then and now. I know you can do that whenever you want until I get an ID, I know about Article 38."

Sunflower folds her arms and her expression softens ever so slightly. "So you did read our bylaws. I didn't think you actually would."

"Well..." Sequoia shrugs playfully and exaggeratingly, a big goofy grin plastered on her face and her eyes closed. "I tried to but I haven't been up here long. That stuff made me crosseyed before I got past your three principles. I had to have Oak explain it to me." She leans forward and puts a hand to one side of her mouth, whispering loudly. "(Just between you and me, she's kind of a hyper nerd. Don't tell her I said that, ok?)" Sunflower doesn't react. Sequoia leans back in her chair, folding her hands atop the table. "But that's ok, I love that about her. I'd be lost without her being a big goofy nerd that loves to explain things in big rambling stories. Terrible at deflection tho, but then, I love

that about her too. Don't worry, we got Article 38 aaaall figured out. Lily just needs to repair the van. She's not as good as her pops, I'm told but... she's real good. Thank you for telling me about that. I never would have considered that such a law existed. I thought I could just... be a person in the world. It was really kind of you and I appreciate it. We'll get that taken care of ASAP."

Sunflower nods. "See that you do." She turns around and tosses over her shoulder "And first thing tomorrow! Change them back!"

"(No, not yet!)" Sequoia stands up and reaches an arm out, calling after Sunflower. "Wait! Sunflower! Please don't go yet! I don't get it, y'know! I promise not to retread over things Sarah told you!"

Sunflower whips around and storms back towards the table, slamming her palms on it. The change in the donation box rattles slightly. Sequoia doesn't even flinch. "You were listening!"

Sequoia puts her finger on her chin and mocks thinking. "No, I was busy changing the bricks into our poster, remember? I was just making a presumption based on Sarah thanking me for understanding." She looks straight up into Sunflower's angry eyes. "You really care about those three, don't you? That's why you keep telling them to stop trying to help. You don't want to see them hurt. That's why you don't just ignore them. Because

they have a lotta love and express that love through making fools of themselves so others can laugh and you admire and respect that. You know the world needs that. That's why you knew they were in town literally less than twenty-four hours after they arrived. If you didn't want to see them... you wouldn't have to. Maybe you don't even realize it but... it's there, Sunflower."

Sunflower peels herself off the table and towers over Sequoia, her arms folded. "You're as dim as the night sky if you think that's true."

Sequoia shrugs and points up at the moon. "Even the night sky has its brilliance and radiance." She furrows her brow and concern washes over her face. "Look, I just... I just don't understand. You're real smart, you have to be to have done what you did ten years ago. Oak's a turbo nerd and she messed up something that couldn't possibly *compare* to what you did. I'm not gonna dredge up that stuff but... You know I saw through that rage. Sarah told you as much. You can tell because of what I said yesterday and what I'm saying now. So... why the act? If you don't like me, fine, y'know, you can just ignore me, whatever, but I know you don't *hate* me because of the advice you gave me. So why act like you do? It's just weird. You don't like me but you follow me and give me advice. You don't hate me but you threaten and insult me. Why do you want to be angry with anyone when... You can just ignore them?" Sunflower puts her hand back on her hip, her



weight shifting appropriately. The scowl slides off her face, leaving it blank. Sequoia sees a foothold and takes it. “Why are you even here right now? I know you don’t really want to kill me because you haven’t. You could’ve just ignored me and had the guild replace that section of the wall, you know they’re good for it, or you could’ve just painted over it. Who cares? If you’re here when you don’t need to be...” And Sequoia smiles warmly up at Sunflower. “Then you don’t have anything else you can be doing, right? Why else do it? So hey, since you got nothing else going on, why not watch the show? You can leave if you hate it, no one will stop you. I won’t even tell the gals you’re here.” She talks behind her hand and lowers her voice to a loud whisper. “(Another thing just between us, I told Oak to wear a toque in case you stopped by. No eavesdropping. It must be hard for her, living near Hemlock all the time and hearing the flies buzz so loud with that sharp hearing. Probably the first peace she’s had in five years.)”

“Snr-” Sunflower manages to catch the smileless snicker before it fully materializes.

“(Reel her in, Coy.)” She folds her hands on the table again. “So... how about it? It literally can’t hurt at all. Like I said, you got nothing better to do, right? You came here just to see me! The fact you didn’t simply paint over the bricks is proof enough. I know you’re watching me, like you said. So... why not watch me perform? Why... why do you *want* to be angry? Why are you fighting that smile?”

Just relax. Enjoy a dumb show by four idiot clown losers. Laugh at us, because we want to be laughed at. Life's absurd, Sunflower. Nothing in the world's so serious that you can't laugh at some clowns. And y'know what? Life's also beautiful." Sequoia's expression grows distant and somewhat sad. "I was trapped in the catacombs under the school for a whole week, living alone on scraps in an alien world, but because of their love here I am, two days later, a clown with other clowns, making goofy art for goofy people and hopelessly in love with it all. All of life, all the beauty we are capable of. Even me, a literal demon from Hell." Her mood picks back up, gaining momentum. "It's never too late to just... pick up a brush and do whatever you want with it. It'll lead you to the happiest place on Earth. The most beautiful place under Heaven. That's not scary man, that's... more beautiful than Earth or Heaven." She gives a short laugh. "Not that I'd know about the latter part."

Sunflower's expression remains blank and completely unreadable. "What's your point."

Sequoia spreads her arms wide, gesturing at the entire scene. "My point is... why not try creating something? Who cares what it looks like in the end. The beauty is that *you did that!* Violence and protection aren't the only things you can pour your heart into, there's beauty and art too, and both are far easier to do. That's the joke, get it? If everyone stopped being so angry about

stuff that doesn't even matter, nothing matters really, and just embraced the absurdity of life and just... put their heart into the beauty of creation, there'd be no need for heroes or villains. All that would be left is beauty, endless love and happiness, for everyone." She puts her hands flat on the table and stands up slightly. Sunflower takes a step back. "*Everyone* deserves that, Sunflower! *Especiallly* you! I wouldn't have a world to love if it wasn't for you! I know something's in the background, eating away at you. You don't have to bear that burden alone. You can share it with others, tell us a story about it, tell anyone a story, put your emotions down on a canvas, create something. Look at what worrying about it is doing to you! You have *decades* of life ahead of you! Is this how you want to feel your whole life? Angry, frustrated, and constantly looking over your shoulder in paranoia? It can't be. So share the burden with others, let them help. If one person isn't enough, try four, or ten, or a hundred more people! The others told me you single-handedly saved the world, but that can't be true! How could any one person save the world? It's impossible! All those eons of evolution and experience, the world people built so you could exist in it, all the folks that raised you and taught you things, the people who invented stuff you needed to do your job, anyone who gave you encouragement or a helping hand or even a meal..." She spreads her arms out wide, waving them slightly. Sunflower's resolve wilts under the onslaught. The slightest crack in her expressionless face forms. "Don't you see? The world isn't small, it's unimaginably huge. It's not

so fragile that it needs any one person, it needs all of us. We're all morons in love floating on the river of life. You could struggle against the current in an attempt to reshape the river, and all you'll do is drown, or you can let it carry you as you look up at the sky and wonder. You end up in the same place in the end anyways, the only difference is the journey you took getting there." Sequoia sits down, a tear in her eye, and manages a weak smile. "Your job's done. Just drift for awhile. Let the wind whip the tears out of your eyes as you chase it. So please... have a seat. Enjoy the show. We can talk things out after."

Sunflower just stares at Sequoia for a long few moments. Her voice cracks for just an instant. "I... Goodbye, Sequoia. Don't worry about the guildhouse or blowing your chance. I won't be needing to watch you anymore."

Sequoia's eyes go wide as she stares Sunflower in the eyes. "You just called me Sequoia."

"I know." Sunflower turns and starts walking back the way she came.

Sequoia starts looking around in a panic. "(Shit! Not like this!)" She stands up and shouts after Sunflower. "Wait! One last thing! Real quick! It's very very important and big world! About why I'm here! Won't take long, promise! Please! Then I'll let you leave! You and the Crossguards should know this!" Sunflower turns around. "(Time for the finale.)" The smuggest, most devious look

Sequoia can muster spreads slowly across her face. “If you’re not here to watch me and make sure I’m behaving...” She exaggeratingly shrugs. “Who knows what kinda mischief I can get up to? Harmless, sure, but... We demons are *terrible* lil shitheads. The *worst*. Who can say what we consider harmless?”

Sunflower’s eyes grow wide. “So you *are* planning something!”

Sequoia nods and points to the left. “Look over there and you’ll see what.” Sunflower follows Sequoia’s finger. A rotund man in a suit and bowler hat with a curly mustache is walking over to one of the few remaining seats. There’s a popping noise, and a banana peel appears under his foot. A gust of wind chases away his hat, and another popping sound is heard as the ground behind him turns to mud. Unwittingly, he falls victim to the banana peel and falls backwards into the mud, causing a sizable splash. His mustache flutters to the ground as if it were a feather. He moans, then harumphs as he picks himself up, gingerly touches under his nose in shock, and quickly heads away from the scene, presumably to get clean. Sunflower’s head whips around to Sequoia, shock obvious across her face. Sequoia grins smugly and squeezes the air in front of her. “Honk honk.”

The corners of Sunflower’s mouth start to curl up, and she bites her knuckle. It takes a few moments for her mouth to resume a more neutral state. “Pff... ..ha...hahem.”

She crosses her arms and closes her eyes, clearing her throat. "Fine. This seems to be the most pressing threat to Feymist at this time. Well played."

Sequoia's eyes go wide with shock and a big bright smile spreads across her face. She clutches her hands together at her chest. "Really?! That's great! You won't regret it, promise. I'll give you the best show so far in my life!" Sequoia winks and sticks out her tongue. "Cuz I ain't ever done this before. And hey. If you wanna talk after the show and patch things up with the gals... We can hold off on striking the set for a little bit. You can even come over to the van and tell us about what's eating you over a campfire."

"Don't push your luck."

Sequoia grabs the donation box and tucks it under an arm, leaving the table and chair standing for later. She shakes her head vigorously. "Not pushing my luck nooope no ma'am. I gotta go get in costume. Don't worry, first thing tomorrow morning after breakfast, promise! See you then! Enjoy the show!" She looks over her shoulder as she hurries away, her voice growing distant. "And don't forget about the raffle! If you want! Promise not to rig it against you!" Sunflower shakes her head and takes one of the few remaining seats in the back row. Sequoia goes backstage and puts the box on a table backstage. "Phew. Sorry I'm late, you just get in a groove, y'know?"

Oak smiles and shakes her head. "There you are! I was wondering if you had gotten cold feet! How'd the meet and greet go? Didja make any new friends?"

Sequoia just smiles warmly and hooks her arm around Oak's neck as she's led to a chest full of costumes. "Y'know Oak, I just may have. I'll tell you about it another time, let's get ready. Our audience awaits!"

## Chapter 11

The curtain rises on a girl wearing an apron, covered in flour and dough. Laid out before her are several sweets, and she pipes frosting onto them. The backdrop is a simple painted scene of a bakery, with a fire drawn into the brick oven and racks of baked goods. The girl dips her finger in the frosting and tastes it, twitching her tail. "Perfect! Hibiscus, you've done it again!"

Heavy footsteps are heard coming from off stage. From the left, a tall man in a chef's uniform stomps onto the scene. The girl piping the frosting flinches with each heavy boot fall, and the man stands directly behind her. He bends over her, looking into her eyes from upside down. "Hibiscus! What did I just see you do!"

Hibiscus gulps audibly. "T-taste the frosting?"

“STEALING the frosting! Corrupting the whole batch with... with this!” and he plucks a hair from her ears with a cartoonish plucking sound. The audience giggles.

Hibiscus cowers before the baker. “Ow! Sir, all I did was dip my finger in... it was clean... How else will I know the frosting turned out ok without tasting it!”

“You dare backtalk me?!” The baker picks up Hibiscus by her collar, drags her to the side of the stage, and heaves her off stage. He shouts after her. “No pay today! Be here tomorrow *on time* for once, Hibiscus, or there will be hell to pay!” The audience boos and hisses, and the baker stomps to the front of the stage. “Don’t you all have jobs you should be working?!” He storms off stage and the curtain falls.

After a few moments, the curtain rises on a backdrop of a cobbled street. Hibiscus hangs her head as she walks in from off stage, her hands stuffed in her pockets. She kicks at nothing on the ground. “Is this to be my reward for walking the straight and narrow? To be harried by the straight and narrow minded?” A portion of the audience gets a good chuckle from that. A tall man, who looks suspiciously like the baker from the previous scene, and also Hemlock, walks in from the opposite direction, wearing a fine suit coat. On his arm is a small woman whose hair barely covers her horns, also wearing finery. Hibiscus rushes to them and kneels down, holding out her hands. “Excuse me, kind sir and madam, I’m not one to



beg, I work many long hours at Ellio's bakery to keep from doing so. Usually. Ellio has docked my pay for merely ensuring the treats were of high quality! I'm in desperate need of fifty coin so I can pay rent and eat. If you could give me even the merest fraction of that, I would be eternally grateful."

The woman recoils from Hibiscus, and speaks in an exaggerated haughty noble accent. "Henry! This... this urchin befouls our path! Do something!"

The tall man reaches into his pocket and takes out a penny. He shows it to Hibiscus, who stares at it. He waves it, her head and shoulders following the movement. "Now fetch!" and he bounces it off the stage and into the audience.

Hibiscus chases it, stumbling over her feet, faceplants, and slides to the edge of the stage. "No! Not in the sewer!"

The man and woman roar with laughter. "Now you can fish for your supper!"

Hibiscus moans. "Oh Cecilia! My goddess! Why do you tease me so! Have I not been a faithful servant? Have I not abided by your laws exactly? Must I be fate's victim?"

The man and women stick their noses in the air and walk towards the other side of the stage. A girl looking very much like Lily, wearing simple commoner's clothing, comes in from the opposite direction and bumps into

them. She falls on her bottom and rubs her head. "Oh sorry guv, lost in me own thoughts. A thousand pardons." The tall man stomps at her and she yelps and scrambles to her feet, giving them room to walk by. She dusts herself off and approaches the sobbing Hibiscus and pats her on the back. "Here now, no need to cry in the gutter. Fifty coin you say?"

Hibiscus looks up at her. "I... yes but... how did you-"

The commoner flourishes her hand, and from up her sleeve appears a coin purse bulging at the seams. She opens it up and plucks a few coins out. "Thirty... Forty... Fifty!"

Hibiscus sits up and stares wide eyed at the commoner. "Th-that's the man's coin purse! Did you..."

The commoner grins. "Reappropriate some walking around money? He won't be missing it, I assure you, lass." She holds out the coins to Hibiscus. "Here, g'won, take it."

Hibiscus shakes her head. "I... I can't..."

"Why not? Didn't you say you had your labor wrongfully taken from you?"

"Well..."

"And don't you need it?"

"Yes..."

“Well then! Sounds like a match made... maybe not quite in Heaven, but certainly under it at any rate, wouldn't you agree? Trust me, that sucker would only waste the money on wine and rich food.”

The audience hears heartbeats pulsing in their ears as Hibiscus hesitates. Many start looking around for a source, but find none. “If... If fifty coin were to fall into my hands... then the goddess could forgive me for that, right?”

“There's using the ol' noggin.” She drops the coin in Hibiscus's outstretched hand, then dashes off stage. Hibiscus clutches the coin to her chest, and runs off stage in the opposite direction. The curtain falls, and rises moments later on the bakery scene. Hibiscus is standing at a table with a cash register on it. She steps out from behind the “counter” with a broom and begins sweeping the stage.

“Time to lean, time to clean'... Sigh... At least Ellio's away on business.” A door chime rings out, and in walks the same commoner from before, carrying a large, empty bag. “It's you! Th-thank you for-” and before she can get the rest of the sentence out, the commoner begins pulling the treats off the “counter” and miming pulling bread away from the backdrop and putting them in her sack. Somehow the sack actually starts to get more full, despite nothing actually going into it, and the items she's “grabbing” disappear from the backdrop. “H-hey! You can't take those!”

“Why not?”

“Because they don’t belong to you! You have to buy them!”

“Do they belong to you?”

“No...”

“Does the money go to you?”

“Not really... It doesn’t matter how much I sell, my pay remains the same, but-”

“And don’t those poor wretches in the town square need to eat the same as you?”

“Well yes, but-”

“Then we’re in agreement! In the sack they go.” As she stuffs the “bread” into the bag, the painted on bread on the backdrop starts to disappear, leaving only painted on empty shelves. The bag bulges, the audience murmurs. Hibiscus stammers, her tail twitching and her hands waving in front of her. The commoner stands before her and puts her hand on her chin. “Hey girl, why are you here?”

“Why am I... To... To earn my living! It’s not like I’m here for my health!”

“Weren’t you begging for coin just yesterday? Doesn’t seem like you can make a living here after all. So I ask you

again, why are you *here*? Is it the free food? The good company? A sweet old boss who appreciates your hard work? The kind and interesting people who shop here? A job that's more like fun to you?"

Hibiscus hangs her head. "No to all accounts..."

"Don't you think that's more than a little unfair? You slave over an oven and rolling pin and can barely make rent, not to mention not being able to sample the very food you make. Don't you think a few people have it far too good and a lot of people have it far too poorly?"

Hibiscus sighs. "Yeah, sure. You're right. Nothing to be done tho. It's the way of the world."

"Says who? The people who have it far too good?"

"Is there an end to your ceaseless questions?"

"Wanna even the playing field, so to speak?"

"What exactly do you mean?"

"Nice and slow, eh. That's ok, we can work with that. What I mean is, we only get one go around on this dirtball. After that, who can really say? So, why not live a little and *take* what you deserve for once! Ditch this place and come with me, and some friends and I will teach you how to keep your earnings. Anything's gotta be better than this place. If nothing else, it'll be a lot more fun than hammering dough and being yelled at." The audience

hears a sharp whistle and the barking of dogs in the distance, getting closer with each moment. The commoner puts a business card on the counter. "Gotta run! Think about it, won't you?" And she dashes off stage with the sack. The whistles and dog barks fade. Hibiscus picks up the card and examines it. A thunderclap resounds over the crowd, the ground tremors under their feet, and some lightning flashes in the sky. The audience gasps and looks around them, but feel no rain, see no further activity. They grow quiet.

Hibiscus pockets the card and slumps over the "counter" and sighs. From off stage walks Ellio, the baker. He stands behind Hibiscus and surveys the scene. He stomps his foot on the ground and Hibiscus jumps, her hair and tail fur puffing out. "I wasn't sleeping I swear!"

"Hibiscus! Just because you sold all of the day's goods doesn't mean you get to take a catnap! Remember: Time to lean-"

"-time to clean. I was doing that very thing when a customer came in to... pick up the last of the bread." Hibiscus nods at the broom. Ellio picks it up, and shoves it towards her. She takes it and starts sweeping.

Ellio walks over to the cash register. "I swear... If I didn't come to get the deposit from time to time you'd be stuffing it... down your... Hibiscus!"

"Yessir! What is it, sir?"

“Where’s all the money from today’s sales!”

“Ah... haha, sales? Gulp. Well... haha funny thing, that. Uhm... notice how I didn’t say the last customer ‘purchased’ the bread?”

“You mean...”

Hibiscus raises her hands in defense. “I tried to stop her! I told her all the bread was for purchasing, but she simply ignored me! What was I to do?”

Ellio growls and turns to her. “Seeing as you’re not bleeding out on the floor, a helluva lot more! Did you even *try* to apprehend her?” Boos follow this cruel treatment of our hero.

“What? Of course not! Bread’s not worth violence! Besides, look at me, I couldn’t apprehend the gravity of this situation, let alone an entire thief!” She laughs nervously as Ellio stomps towards her.

Ellio starts grabbing fistfulls of air as he stalks Hibiscus. “For that, I’m not going to simply fire you, I’m going to save the hangman an afternoon!” and he lunges at Hibiscus, who yelps and jumps out of the way. She stands before the backdrop of the empty racking, and Ellio kicks his feet and charges like a bull after her. She jumps out of the way, and the sound of shelves crashing is heard. Ellio struggles to get out from under fallen racking that

simply did not exist moments prior. Nor does the racking exist in the painting anymore. The audience gasps.

Hibiscus runs to the edge of stage left and looks at Ellio struggling. "It... It's better to seize life while I still have it and leave the goddess a mess to sort out later than it is to stay on her good side!" And she dashes off stage, the curtain falling. The audience whoops and cheers, and the play continues. It shows scenes of Hibiscus training with the thief in the Thieves' Guild, doing a few robberies, showing great aptitude for it. After lingering on those scenes for awhile, the curtain rises, and painted on the backdrop is a throne room. King Rafflesia sits on a folding chair spray painted gold. He strokes his long, wizened beard, brooding.

From off stage walks a young woman, who kneels before the king. He rolls his eyes and motions for her to stand up. Princess Lilac looks up at the king. "Father. Thank you for taking the time from your oh-so-busy schedule to meet with your only heir."

Rafflesia scowls. "Enough coyness. Speak your business, daughter."

"It's about the taxes."

"Hoh? I didn't expect you to give a whit about the kingdom's finances. I thought you too busy holding those insipid meetings with the mayor and his ilk. What about the taxes?"



“It’s just... Why do we bother taxing the poorest twenty percent at all? I was looking at the books, and they make up most of the taxes! Worse yet, you don’t appear to be taking *any* taxes from the lords and barons! Would it not make more sense to fill our coffers with those that have money, instead of forcing the most vulnerable people, *your* people, to scrape together what little money they can so they can keep their heads? We would have more money to reinvest in infrastructure and need to dip into the royal stocks less, plus win the love and loyalty of the citizens!”

“In the middle of this crime wave? When their wealth is being plucked from under their very noses?”

“It’s not nearly all of it and you know it. Yes, I *have* been talking with the mayor, and he informs me that the people are getting angry. Angry for not being able to put food on the table. Angry for not being able to pay the rent the throne sets on property. Angry for not being able to raise a family and enjoy the luxuries the nobles flaunt before them! This crime wave will worsen if we don’t-”

Rafflesia waves his hand dismissively, propping up his head on his other hand. “If we don’t what? Take the money from the very nobles who employ these so-called ‘poor’ people? Force the lords and barons to pay the money they rightfully earned through centuries of loyal service to the throne? After all the centuries of building the factories and businesses that provide a means of living

to the common folk? If the citizens want to better their status, we provide that opportunity through service in the military.” The crowd boos loudly at this, and several wadded up balls of paper get hurled at the stage, falling well short.

Lilac is undeterred. “Which we shouldn’t even be doing! We should be making peace with our neighbors and making allies of those across the sea! Do you not see that the only thing we gain from this campaign is land for the graveyard? Think of all we have to gain in knowledge and trade if we were to cease these pointless battles and turn our attention inward!”

Rafflesia scoffs. “And deny the undertaker his fee?”

Lilac recoils. “That... What a horrible thing to say!”

Rafflesia shakes his head. “Foolish child. You understand nothing of the delicate balance that must be maintained to keep this kingdom stable. You come here, speaking of the needy and making peace, but you cannot fathom the forces that work against us.”

Lilac stamps her feet and huffs. “Those forces live within your own mind!”

Rafflesia raises to his feet and waves his hand. “Silence! How dare you speak to your king that way! Guard! Take her to her room, full of the books and comforts she shares not with her precious ‘poor’.”

A small girl with a red tail ending in a spaded point, wearing cheap costume armor, rushes in from off stage and takes Lilac by the arm. Lilac shakes her arm loose. "Why you... unhand me! I can walk there myself!" and Lilac is escorted off stage. The king flips through a book for a few moments, and an eerily similar looking girl wearing finery walks before the king and coughs. "Well? Out with it!"

"Y-yes your grace. It's just... uhm... Th-that mercenary you sent for has arrived. He's standing outs-"

"Don't just stand there, girl! Show him in at once!" The herald quickly bows, then rushes off stage.

From offstage lurches a suit of leather armor, with a facewrap obscuring the face. It's roughly the same size as Hemlock, but can't be her, seeing as she's playing the king. It animates oddly, exaggeratingly, like a puppet on strings, only without the strings. It kneels in front of the king, and from within the figure's cloak comes Hemlock's voice. "I have answered your summons, my liege. How may I serve you?"

Murmurs spread throughout the audience, with a few snippets of conversation audible. "Puppetry? That clothing's loose, it can't be..." "...gotta be a tape recorder hidden in that thing." "I dunno... It doesn't sound tinny..."

The king sits back down on his throne. "Those are words sorely missed in these halls. Rise, Wolfred. I would

“speak to you plainly and directly.” The not-Hemlock Wolfred stand up to its full height, and moves its neck, cracking noises being heard. “You may have heard of the rash of robberies being carried out across my kingdom. The captain of the guard, capable tho he may be, has yet to uncover this... uncommon thief.”

“And you want me to smoke ‘im out, is that it?”

The king shakes his head. “These robberies... They grow bolder with each case. It’s only a matter of time before the thief becomes so bold as to steal from my own vaults. My own men cannot be trusted to stop this thief, who will only purchase their blindness. But you... Your loyalty has already been paid for. You I can trust. I want you to make my vault more alluring to this thief. Let him come to us, and then...”

The hollow costume draws a finger across its neck. “A brilliant plan, sire. I will, of course, need to act even above your captain, and direct the guard accordingly. Will they accept orders from a mere mercenary?”

“They will. They know the punishment for disobedience.” and the king draws his finger across his own neck. The Wolfred costume bows, then makes a show of turning on its heels. “Just a moment. I have further orders for you. Had I need of only setting a trap, I wouldn’t have asked for you by name.”

Wolfred turns around. "As I suspected. What else would you ask of me, sire?"

The king stands and faces the audience and addresses them directly. The lights dim and a spotlight appears over King Rafflesia. "My daughter... Were she not my only heir, I'd have thrown her to the minotaur long ago. I have left her wanting for nothing, promised her even the throne upon my passing despite not being a male heir! I've given her the most researched books in the kingdom, hired the best tutors in all the realm, and yet she still cannot grasp reality! So poisoned is her mind with these tales of inequality and class that I fear she covets the throne before her due time! But 'ere, a way to thwart she who I should be able to embrace without feeling the dagger's kiss... and perhaps leverage this into another heir." The lights come back on and the king sits down. He addresses the conglomerate of clothing that is Wolfred. "I suspect my daughter has been conspiring with the townspeople to take the throne from me. Uncover their plot, and I will name your firstborn son my heir."

"My liege thinks much of my skills to believe I'll live long enough to produce a son."

Rafflesia reaches deep into his robe and tosses a heavy, small sack on the ground. Costume jewelry spills out of it. "Do a good job, and you can allow your skill to fallow." The suit of armor plucks a gem from the ground, pockets it, and bows before shambling off stage.

The curtain falls on act one, and the audience gives a standing ovation. The gals come out from behind the curtain, wearing their last costumes, and so does the mass of clothing that makes up Wolfred. They all take a deep bow, and as the Wolfred costume bows, it falls apart, revealing no one inside. The audience hoots and hollers, whistling and feet stamping. Sequoia puts the donation box on the edge of the stage, and cups her hands over her mouth. “Ten minute intermission while we regroup for the next act! You know where to send the love!” and she points down at the box. Several audience members come up and drop bills in the box, everyone buzzing about the last scene. The gals walk behind the curtain and Sequoia wobbles a bit. “Did you see their faces?! Haha that’s amazing! I... I never felt so pumped and energized! Where’s that coffee tho for real.”

Lily passes a giant thermos to Sequoia who gulps greedily. “And not a dry short in the house. Making that costume fall apart just as we bowed was genius.”

“I was a lil worried that it’d dispel the illusion but people seemed to really get into it! I hope that doesn’t make the rest of the show kinda lackluster.”

“Nah, it was perfect. Now they won’t be distracted with trying to figure out how we did it. Showing them real magic is only gonna endear them to us. You’re doing great, Coy. That tremor, the heartbeat, the bit with the bread and the sack, the sparks on the swords when

Hibiscus was learning swordplay... They're riveted. You good to keep going? Do you need that capsule?"

Sequoia waves dismissively. "I'll be alright. That bar and this coffee are propping me up."

Oak peeks her head between the curtain, looking out at the audience. She pulls her head back in. "That crowd is massive, holy shit! We may have to do a shorter break than usual, they're getting antsy. C'mon, let's strike the sets and bring in the next scene." They start sliding set pieces out of the way, bringing in new ones, and they finish in record time. They all get into their costumes, and Hemlock strides out to the edge of the stage and scoops up the donation box, bringing it backstage.

The curtain rises on Lilac pacing about in her room, the backdrop a painted library of books. She turns and addresses the audience. "It'd be one thing if my father's madness consumed only his mind, but to see it eat away at the sense of the people as well... Does he not see he fulfills the prophecy he created? And this butcher who roams our halls, attempting to scatter my shadow..." Out from under the desk slips a figure dressed in all black that's obviously Oak. She motions to the audience to be quiet, then mimes opening drawers and stuffing her pockets. She glances at the girl musing to herself, and continues to plunder. Finally, she sits in the chair at the "desk" that's actually just a folding table. She plucks a book off the table and makes a show of reading it. The

audience laughs. "I need to find a way to divert his attention away from me so I can put an end to this nightmare! But to do that *and* get my father alone..." Hibiscus tosses a coin to the right of the pacing princess, who jumps and makes a show of putting up her fists. "Wha- Who's there! Show yourself!"

Hibiscus slinks close to the ground and slips behind Lilac. She stands directly behind her, unnoticed. As Lilac whips around, Hibiscus follows, sticking to her back like glue. Finally she leans in close to her ear. "That seemed to do a pretty good job of distracting you. Maybe try that?"

Lilac jumps back in shock, and puts up her fists again. "So, my father was right about one thing at least. How much did you hear?"

Hibiscus shrugs. "From the part where you were muttering to yourself about how to evade a butcher. I thought we were supposed to be eating the rich, not the other way around."

"Hah! A wit as fast as your fingers, I see. Then I'm afraid you know too much already!" She stalks in a circle around Hibiscus, who has her hands clasped behind her back and follows Lilac's movements. Lilac charges, and Hibiscus slinks low, easily evading the blow and popping up behind Lilac, tapping her on the shoulder. "So you're the thief that's got everyone scared... I'm sorry to say, but the vault is buried deep below the lowest obvious levels of



the castle. Only the... monarch can open it, with one key hidden in the throne and one in the crown itself. You threw your life away for mere trinkets.”

“And a few books! Honestly, this is merely an information gathering mission. All this is just to prove I was here. If my compatriots knew how easily I discovered the secret of the vault, I’d be laughed right out of the guild! So try to make this look good, ok?”

“I’ll do better than that. It’ll be awfully convincing when I drag you by the tail to my father!” And she lunges at Hibiscus again, who dodges and flicks Lilac in the ear. “Ow! Coward! Fight me!”

“And spoil those looks? No thanks, I’m a thief, not a monster. You know, if you want to distract someone so bad, there’s lots of ways. For example, show them something they really want and lead them into a wall.” And Hibiscus dodges another swing, Lilac’s knuckles scraping against the backdrop, and several books painted into the backdrop fall from their shelves. Paper appears out of thin air and flutters around the scene. “But seeing as that hulking murderer wants me, I can’t say I recommend it. You could also try something dramatic, like... say... an explosion in the courtyard.” The sound of a loud explosion tears through the audience, and the space off stage glows a fiery yellow and red. The whole area shakes with the explosion. The audience, now fully bought into the impossibilities before them, ooohs and aaahs.

Lilac rushes to the edge of the stage and cups a hand over her eyes, surveying the audience. Hibiscus slips back under the desk. “Gone.” And Lilac punches the backdrop, sending paper flying from where her fist struck. She walks past the desk, and Hibiscus slips out and stands behind her, then taps on her shoulder. Lilac leaps in shock. “Ah! Don’t you know any other tricks?!”

“Well... there is one, but I’m not sure you’ll like it.”

“I doubt you have anything likable to give me.”

Hibiscus slips off her mask, pops forward and kisses Lilac on the lips to the whooping of a few members of the crowd. “But don’t waste that one on that beast of a merc. Save it for next we meet, ok gorgeous?” and Hibiscus runs to the edge of the stage and leaps off, then circles around to the back of the bandstand.

Lilac is standing in place, rubbing her cheek. A smile forms across her face. “So, our thief has a sense of humor and a romantic streak, eh. With the seed planted, all I need is to water it, fertilize the soil with blood, and pluck the fruits from the vine. This will be even easier than I hoped!” and she walks off stage and the curtain falls.

That’s the last of the big displays Sequoia has up her sleeves for the show. She creates various other effects, more sparks, more rumbling, flashes of light. The play continues, the audience’s attention rapt. Wolfred searching bars to root out the Thieves’ Guild. A few scenes

of Lilac leading Hibiscus on. The Thieves' Guild being raided by the king's guard, several of the members escaping like rats into the night. A scene detailing the king instituting a draft for the war effort. Hibiscus resolving to steal from the vault and use the riches to whisk Lilac away from all this. A town hall scene with a whole room full of animated costumes, who all rise and wave pitchforks and march to the castle. Hibiscus steals into the throne room, where Lilac is waiting for her. She reveals she used Hibiscus to lead Wolfred to the Thieves' Guild, so she can use the distraction to poison her father, who lies dead on the ground. Wolfred appears off stage and Hibiscus and Wolfred fight, sparks flying, and Hibiscus gets the upper hand and slays Wolfred. Lilac stabs Hibiscus in the back, and with her dying breath Hibiscus reveals her compatriots already cleaned the vault out days ago, and the plan was to leave her penniless and at the mercy of the mob. Hibiscus has a soliloquy bemoaning her fate, and dies, just as the mob of costumes charges into the throne room and the curtain falls. The crowd goes wild and gives a standing ovation. The gals all give a bow at the end, and announce the winner of the raffle. Someone they've never heard of. They explain the deal to the raffle winner, who promises to bring stuff to the next show in two nights. Sequoia dresses back in her suit, and sits at the table with the donation box, chatting with people as they leave. Delbruk, Turk, Apricot, and Tabby all talk with the gang for a long while afterwards, exuberant over the effects and marveling at the show. Sequoia looks

out at the seat Sunflower was sitting in to find it empty. She shakes her head and continues her conversation with the others. It's finally time to pack up the sets and costumes and make the arduous journey back to the van, everyone exhausted but in high spirits, gushing over the effects and the show everyone put on.

At no point does anyone notice Sunflower following them along the rooftops of Feymist.

## Chapter 12

It's late, and the gals are all sitting on the mattresses in the van. Lily, Oak, and Sequoia on one side, Hemlock on the other, with the mattress Sequoia made between them. Lily holds the donation box in her hands. "Lookit that, it's stuffed to the gills! Let's read the reviews, gals." She unlocks the box and upturns it over the middle mattress. She has to shake it to unstick the wad of money jammed into it, but eventually shakes loose a sizable amount of bills, fistfulls of coins, and more than a few folded up notes. "Dang, what a haul! We haven't had a night like this in ages! This'll easily cover groceries for the week, fuel, and getting Coy's ID! We may even be able to refresh our supplies without having to answer the Loser Board if this keeps up!"

Hemlock pokes around the pile with a solitary finger. “Yeah yeah, where’s the love letters from the honeys.”

Lily laughs. “Y’know what, I’m in too good of a mood to bop you for that. Lessee... One for Lock, and another... One for ‘That beastly Wolfred mrawr’ and has some lipstick... Oh hey, this one’s for Coy!”

Sequoia’s eyes go wide. “For me?!”

Oak wraps her arm around Sequoia’s waist. “Don’t be that surprised. The sfx kicked! Plus you’re a real unique and cute gal, I figured you’d get at least one. Our fans love to give us little notes like this when they can’t afford to tip. Those are more valuable to us than money.”

Lily snickers. “Except when we need money to live.” She sits in front of Sequoia and leans in close. “Well? Go on! Open it! Tell us what it says!”

Sequoia laughs and clutches it to her chest. “What if it’s real steamy, tho.”

Lily leans back and crosses her arms, grinning. “Then we definitely wanna hear you read it aloud.”

“Then I’ll have to put on a sultry voice for it.” Sequoia unfolds it and gives it a quick scan. “Nope, it’s not steamy. It says: ‘Sequoia. Your suit looked nice on you. Your haughty laughter as Noble #1 was inspiring and the special effects were quite something. This was the most entertaining bastardization of Lichtenstein’s classic drama

I've ever seen. Thank you for the wonderful show. Love, your first fan.' Aw. That's kinda... sweet, in its weird way. Kinda stiff tho. But why didn't they put their name on it? Where's the fun in that?"

Oak laughs. "That is the fun in that!"

Hemlock scans each of the notes addressed to her and pockets the one with the lipstick. "No way, I'm with Coy here. If there's no hotel room number and key, or at least a phone number, what fun could be had? Congrats girl. You should hold onto that. None of us kept our first admirer letter and we all regret it."

Lily shakes her head. "No we don't. I don't need to keep a letter that says 'You look like the perfect height for'"

Sequoia puts a finger on her chin. "For?"

Lily shrugs and closes her eyes. "Who knows, I took a lighter to it before I could read the rest." She looks back at Hemlock again. "Going catting around tonight, Lock?"

Hemlock takes the note out of her pocket and waves it. "You know it. Wouldn't want to disappoint my adoring fans, now would I?"

Lily laughs. "You're such a scoundrel."

"Yep, it's the best. Don't worry, I'll be back by breakfast, but don't wait up either." She peels herself off

the mattress, cracks her back, slips on her coat, and waves as she leaves the van.

Lily claps her hands and rubs them. “Well, should we turn in, then?”

Oak flashes her a grin. “Turn into what?”

Lily slumps and sighs. “Someone who doesn’t make that joke literally every time I say that.” She wraps her arms around the other two girl’s waists and leans back against the wall. “How about we all get into jammies, pop on a movie, and get snuggly on the couch together? We got this great one about this brain surgeon/physicist/rockstar and his jet car.”

Sequoia pecks Lily on the cheek. “Hell yeah. Nothing would make this day any better than that.”

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An egg breaks over the pan, and it sizzles, matching the sun hanging above everyone. Several more eggs follow it, popping in the cold morning air. Lily yawns and scratches her side, watching the eggs to ensure the yolks don’t break. Sequoia sets her plate aside, waiting for the next phase of breakfast to arrive. “Damn but can you cook Lil! It makes Apri’s bar seem like a distant nightmare. Y’know, we still need to find a chore for me. I can learn to cook if you wanna...” and she drops her voice into a husky

tone. “Do something more lurid with your mornings and girl.”

Lily laughs. “Yeah right! Scent is half of taste and I’d like my eggs to taste fresh and fluffy instead of sulfuric.” She sticks her tongue out at Sequoia, who reciprocates. “It is appreciated. I like cooking, honestly. We do still have to find a chore for you tho... and you do a bulk amount of the eating... I’ll think about it.” Lily passes around the last stage of breakfast to a hungry trio. “What do you have planned for the morning?”

Sequoia barely manages to speak between mouthfuls of egg. “Me? Not us?”

Lily shakes her head. “Nope. I gotta fix the van. If Oak’s right about that whole article whatever thing, then we really can’t afford to put it off any longer. Plus no way in heeeell do I wanna drag all that junk all the way from here to the bandstand again. If I get started soon, I should be able to have it done in about... mmm... four hours?”

Oak bumps her hip against Sequoia’s as she sits next to her. “Which should be enough time for me to whip up a passable birth cert and come up with a cover story for you. By the time we’re done, we can drive to the DMV, it’ll be just before closing so they’ll ask less questions, and we’ll be back in time for supper! How does that sound?”

“A cover story?”



“Sure, about why you don’t have an ID as of yet in your life. It’s not as simple as just saying ‘Hey, you missed one’, and we don’t have a letter from the KnoCs explaining a ritual mishap to account for your appearance.”

Sequoia rests her head on Oak’s shoulder and rolls her face to look up at her. “Thanks Oak, you’re the sweetest. It’ll give me something to think about on the way into town to change those bricks back.”

Oak looks down at her, confused. “Wait, you’re gonna fix the guild’s wall?”

“Sure, Sunflower asked me to last night before she watched the show.”

All eyes turn to Sequoia. Hemlock’s fork drops on her plate with a clank. “Wh-whaaaaat? Sunflower *came* to the show? She *watched* it?”

Sequoia burrows her way into the crook of Oak’s neck, nudging it with her nose, closing her eyes and mumbling sleepily. “Yeah, sure, I mean I didn’t make sure she sat through the *entire* show but she was still there during the last act, at least. Uhm. Surprise?”

Oak looks down at her with wide eyes. “How the hell did you manage *that*? To our knowledge, not once in all the years she’s been harassing us has she actually gone to one of our shows!”

“It was simple really. We talked things out. Well, I did most of the talking. Like, pretty much all of it. All that stuff I said in the tavern yesterday, I laid it all out for her. I opened my heart and poured it out for her, and I got through to her, gals. It was a bit sappy. A lot sappy. But it’s what she needed to hear. She even calls me ‘Sequoia’ now instead of ‘demon’. We’re still working up to ‘Coy’ and ‘Sunny’. Once she calls me Coy, I’ll know I’ll have won.”

Hemlock shakes her head. “Goddamn unbelievable Coy. What the hell have we been so scared of for the past six years?” She stands up and cracks her neck. “Well, we better skiddaddle so you can keep your promise. Besides, these two are probably suuuuper antsy for us to leave.”

Lily crosses her arms in front of her and huffs. “Damn queer!”

Oak laughs. “H-hey, c’mon now, it’s not uhm... Ok it is exactly like that. So four hours! Not a minute sooner! We’ll have everything, including lunch, ready. Don’t forget to grab some posters in the van to hang around town for tomorrow’s show. They’re on the art desk, can’t miss ‘em.”

Sequoia manages to peel herself off Oak’s shoulder. She opens the door and swings herself into the van, scoops up the posters and puts them in the backpack, and slips it on. She and Hemlock wave at the other two as they walk down the trail leading back to town.

Hemlock playfully bops Sequoia on the head. “So what is it with you and Sunflower, anyway. Crushing already?”

Sequoia reaches up to thump her fist gently on Hemlock’s shoulder. “Maybe. It’s just that... I dunno, Hemlock. I see her, and I can’t help but feel like she needs a friend. It’s so sad to see someone that lonely and isolated.”

“She makes you think of the catacombs, doesn’t she.”

“Yeah... a bit. You’re probably thinking, if I could prank Sunflower so hard, then I should’ve been able to prank my way past some guards on campus. I figured... If I made everyone that scared, what was the point of coming up here. I thought I had to stay down there to make others happy. It’s like the same thing is going on in her head. She has to isolate herself and be the people’s hero or whatever in case some big catastrophe happens again. It’s just too sad to think about. I want us all to get along and... I wanna hear her laugh.”

“Sounds like a crush to me.”

“Maybe it is. We’ll just have to see where the river takes me.” Sequoia looks down at her feet. “So uhm. Hey. Why won’t you tell me that story about your village?”

Hemlock strokes her chin. “Hm... How do you mean?”

“Like... the other morning you told me that big, weird, hugely personal story, but you won’t tell me about where you grew up? Why you left a place you seem to have loved so much? Why the village disbanded? What’s up with that?”

Hemlock folds her arms and looks up at the sky for a few moments. Then she looks down at Sequoia, not watching the trail ahead of her. “Y’know, you gotta be careful where and how you tell some stories, Coy. Like take your story about the Reveal. There are some towns where we simply can’t tell it at all without causing huge problems.” Her eyes dart back and forth, and her face grows stern, her voice even and measured, but low. “You never know who may be *listening* and *watching*. You may not think she is, but you also don’t know for sure she isn’t. And some folks got a nasty, terrible temper.”

Sequoia stares wide eyed at Hemlock. “No way.”

Hemlock continues to peer down at Sequoia. “We can be coy and dance around it, and anyone who may be listening would never be the wiser. That’s why we’re so careful to not slip up.” Hemlock’s tenseness melts away, and she eases up into a goofy smile then shrugs. “Or well, as careful as our idiot brains allow us to be, anyways.”

Sequoia stammers for a second. “You don’t mean-”

“So hey. How about I tell you Sunflower’s full name?”

“But...” Sequoia’s finger reflexively finds her chin and she digs her eyes into her brain. “... ..Sorry about all that, Lock. Y’know how I get. So c’mon man, spill it! It can’t be just ‘Sunflower’, nothing else.”

“Atta girl. See, you catch on quick. Sunflower Slipstream is her full name. Pretty conventional for Brezitella’s naming tradition.”

Sequoia watches the information dissolve into her brain. “Sunflower Slipstream, huh... Wait, she’s from Brezitella too?”

Hemlock nods. “Yep, most women from Brezitella are named after plants. Dunno why, but it’s been that way for centuries. Dad named me Hemlock as his way of giving the finger to puritanical views on gender. I was his son, but I grew up without pronouns and wore whatever the hell the village tailor made. Anyways, point being, if you meet a girl with a plant name, chances are she’s from Brezitella. It’s how you know The Thief and the Throne takes place in Brezitella too.”

Sequoia puts her hands behind her head and leans back as she walks. “Wow, I said the world was super big last night but now I’m not so sure... Hey so, is it ok to ask about what you believe happened ten years ago?”

“Honestly, I believe the papers, as weird as that sounds. Part of the reason I walked away the other day was cuz I didn’t wanna dredge it up with Oak again. I’m

sure you've guessed, I'm a real paranoid type'a gal, y'know? So you're probably asking yourself 'So why does she believe what 'The Man' is telling us?'"

"Pretty much, yeah." Sequoia laughs and stuffs her hands in her pockets. "You and Oak butt heads a lot? I didn't peg you for the nerd type."

Hemlock laughs, shoving her hands deep in her coat pockets. "You didn't peg me at all!"

If Sequoia was drinking, she would've done the most classic spit take ever. "Pffft haha gross!"

Hemlock smiles to herself, obviously proud of the results of her joke. "Kinda weird, isn't it? Oak's a real emotional gal, but grounds herself in knowledge. I'm a pretty tough but mellow kinda gal, and I've got my head in the clouds twenty-four seven. Guess some folks use the opposite of what they are to ground their identity. Maybe that's why I believe the papers. It's too elaborate, too weird, too big world for it to be anything else except true to me. Using an ancient forgotten taboo summoning ritual to bring something into this world isn't just big world, Coy. That's big reality. It's like Oak was telling you the other day, it's too big, too alien to truly grasp. That's why I believe it's true."

Sequoia tilts her head. "I'm not sure I follow."

They hit the city limits, entering through the west side's gate and walking side by side on the sidewalk. Morning joggers and dog walkers are able to slip past them easily. "Ok so, picture a head of state being assassinated. They examine the recording, inspect the body, and they realize there's more to this story than a single bullet striking some important dude. You've got this weird path for the bullet, multiple wounds, mismatching wounds, etc. Only, that's just what they tell you. You never get to see the body for yourself." Hemlock shrugs. "Not like you'd know one way or the other unless you were an expert in that sorta thing. So the media speculates, thinks up conspiracies, then suddenly SNAP! It actually was only one guy, and the whole crazy story before was just people's imaginations running away with them before the facts were known. That sudden and drastic shift in narrative indicates a lie pushed on them by the state. We didn't get that with Rainsoaked ten years ago. They kept that weirdo story and ran with it and are sticking to it all these years later. Governments don't let something like that be known and make it the official story unless it was either a total fabrication to begin with, or it's totally true."

Sequoia's head reaches her shoulder. She rolls her eyes around until she finds purchase on a thought. "Ok, so... Then it's a total fabrication. The other two have a point, it really is a kooky weird tale. What they said made a lot of sense to me."

“Or it’s totally true. It all comes down to belief, Coy. You can believe that story, or know it’s all a hoax. The end of the story doesn’t change one way or the other. We’re left in a quantum state. We can’t observe the past, so we’re left with two equally possible, equally plausible... sort of... explanations that lead to the same observable result. It ain’t ‘reality is what you make of it’, Coy. It’s ‘you define reality.’ Probably a poor translation made by some asshole with too many brains and not enough heart. I choose to believe in the fantastical impossibility that reality could be. That’s what makes me happy, and dream, and wonder. Believing that assassination or whatever thing the other two believe... That makes them happier because it allows them to be satisfied in their own wisdom and intelligence. Of course the whole summoning thing and heroes and villains bit is hokey bullshit. The government’s persistence in the story means that intelligence is rebellion, so people latch onto a rational explanation. Thus they become confident in themselves, and wiser too. You *should* always question what you read, hear, and see, and this benefits the government and the media too. They can print whatever bullshit they want, tell any narrative they want, spread counter rumors, folks will believe what they’re gonna believe regardless. So you can influence belief by publishing something unbelievable, pushing people to believe something rational.”

Sequoia tosses this notion around her brain for a bit, grabbing the end of the thread and pulling it along. “So



they could publish an outlandish truth that no one would believe and people would do the mental legwork for them to rationalize reality, especially if they heard some state-spread rumor that made more sense. Due to the papers, the cat was already out of the bag, so if they tried to cover it up, people would disbelieve that story and distrust the government. No truth better hidden than the one right in front of your nose.”

Hemlock smiles wide and turns on the road that spills out onto town square. “Exactly! See, you’re becoming a properly paranoid believer just like yours truly. No one actually believes that hokey story, just idiot dreamers like me. I like to think everything could have a cool narrative arc and that the world is a far, far stranger place than anyone could ever hope to know. The only person who knows for sure is Sunflower. Well, and some folks who helped her along the way. And probably the Crossguard Guild and the governments of the world. Anyways, showtime, Coy. Let’s put Apri’s bar to the test.”

“Huh?” Sequoia looks around, seemingly only just now seeing the environment around them. “We’re at the guild already! I got totally lost in our conversation, honestly. I didn’t even know we entered town yet! Guess I got my head in the clouds too. Ok so.” She looks around suspiciously, making sure the coast is clear. “This will take a few moments. Keep a lookout and make sure I’m undisturbed, ok?”

Hemlock looks down at Sequoia and scratches her head. "I thought you were gonna fix the wall?"

"You'll see." Sequoia reaches out and touches the wall, and after a few moments the tell-tale popping noise rings out. A potted plant nearby twists itself into the shape of a pretzel. The spot where Sequoia recolored the bricks is indeed fixed, just as she promised. Totally clean, exactly the color they were before. It's the rest of the wall that's different. There's a huge, cartoonish drawing of Sequoia squinting and sticking her tongue out dominating the side of the wall. A word bubble is coming out of the cartoonish Sequoia's mouth that says "I said I'd change *those* bricks back." There's another clean spot, the same size and shape as the spot she actually fixed. She reaches into the backpack, pulls out a poster, and holds it up to that spot on the wall before a popping noise is heard. She pulls her hand away and the poster sticks fast. "Behold, my latest work. Check, Sunflower. Your move."

Hemlocks' eyes go wide as dinner plates before she busts out laughing, bending over and propping herself up on Sequoia's shoulder. "I can't... I can't believe... Hahaha damn Coy! Let's haha let's beat feet to the tavern. We wanna be on neutral ground when she sees that." She walks briskly down the side streets and alleys leading to the Boar, Sequoia jogging to keep up.

They walk inside, and there's Sarah, her head propped in her hands, leaning against the bar. Her head picks up as

the gals walk in, and she makes a show of cleaning a spot off with a rag. “Well well, look who it is. ...Coy, right? Awesome show last night. I’m not usually one for stuffy old plays, but you four did real good.”

Sequoia sits down at the bar and folds her arms atop it. “Hey Sarah! Thanks, I didn’t know you were in attendance.”

“After the other day? Couldn’t resist. So how have you ruined Sunflower’s day today? Get you two anything to drink, eat?”

Hemlock flips her coat back so it drapes over the bar stool. “Just some seltzer.”

Sequoia smacks her lips. No Lily to spoil her plans. “And I’ll have a chocolate milkshake.”

Sarah makes a show of cleaning in front of them. “You know you gotta be twenty-one to sit up here right. Sorry Coy, without ID I’m gonna have to ask you to take it to a table.”

Sequoia gets up out of the seat and stammers a bit. “Oh, ah, I didn’t know, so-”

Sarah raises her hands in defense. “Jokes jokes... You are kinda naive, huh. It’s fine, no one’s gonna care, except Sunflower. That’s her seat.”

Sequoia sits back down and smiles smugly. "That's why I'm sitting here. Hey, thanks for talking to her the other day. It means a lot to me."

"Psh, whatever. Thanks for being like the only other person to try to understand her."

Sequoia greets her old friend, the rafters, and puts a finger to her chin. "Uhm, are you two...?"

Sarah pours a seltzer for Hemlock and slides it over. "'Us two'?" Sarah laughs hard as she tosses some scoops of ice cream in a blender. "Goddess no. Ugh. Even if my wife wouldn't kill me for thinking of another gal, Sunflower's way too butch for me. I'm not one for the 'cute but scary' types. Besides, she's only in town for a few weeks every few months anyways. Kinda like you four."

Even Hemlock's surprised by this. "Really?"

Sequoia tilts her head. "Wait, she doesn't live here?"

Sarah shakes her head and places the milkshake in front of Sequoia, sticking a straw in it. "She doesn't live anywhere but at guildhouses, man. She goes town to town, wherever the guild needs her, and sleeps in the guildhouse. I hear they have beds for traveling members like her. She doesn't seem to mind, but then, who knows what's going on in that head most of the time."

Sequoia lets out all her breath in one blow. "Phew. I'm relieved honestly. I was worried that I wouldn't see her for

months after we leave here, and it kinda made me a little sad. Still tho, guess there's no guarantee we'll be going the same direction... Hey Lock, where are we going next anyways?"

"The next major stop's Yama. There's towns along the way, like Plankspire and Deuter, but Yama's where we're gonna be posting up longer than a few days. By the time we're done here and get up there, it'll almost be time for the spring festival. Besides, we gotta take you to meet Lily's folks."

"Oh right... Oh yeah!" Sequoia reaches into the backpack and pulls out a poster. "Could you hang up one of our posters, please? Unless it'll make Harvey upset."

Sarah takes the poster and unfurls it with one snap of her wrist. "I'll hang it up *because* it'll make Harvey upset. No bosses no masters. Lessee here... How about... directly in front of where Sunflower sits." and she peels off some tape from a tape dispenser nearby and attaches it to the corners, sticking the poster over several other wall adornments.

Sequoia laughs. "Hell yeah! You're the coolest, Sarah."

"Whatever. It's funny to see her reactions sometimes. Not so much to be on the receiving end, but it's worth it. Sometimes. Speaking of, you never did answer my question."

Sequoia rolls her eyes brainward. "Question... Oh, how I ruined Sunflower's day?" She gets a smug look on her face. "Hehe. When you get the chance, you should take a nice, leisurely stroll around the guild's wall."

The door to the tavern swings open, and Sunflower strides in. Her eyes dart around, resting on Sarah. "This morning's full of surprises. Hey Sunflower, you're here early."

Sunflower walks over to the bar and stands behind Sequoia, not taking her eyes off Sarah. "Eggs and toast with some coffee, Sarah. Thanks." She peers down at Sequoia. "Ahem. Move over." Without a word, Sequoia slides to the next seat over, and Sunflower sits between Hemlock and Sequoia, leaning her sword against the bar. She jerks her thumb at Hemlock. "Sarah, drown this oaf in beer. On my tab. Anything to keep that mouth busy."

"You know we can't serve this early."

Hemlock's wolfish smile spreads across her face as she lifts her seltzer to her lips. "Hey now, I can think of a better way to keep my mo-" Sunflower cuts off her innuendo with a glare.

Sequoia shrugs. "It's just as well, we have a day ahead of us and it'd be ruined if she got plastered." She smiles up at Sunflower. "I'm glad you're here! I didn't think you were gonna be here this early which is why we are. Here I mean. Y'know. I get that you have your own little routine and

world and wanted you to have it still. Not that I'm not super happy to see you, but y'know. Hehe. Didja see I fixed those bricks?"

Sarah pours some coffee out for Sunflower and sets it down in front of her, then heads into the back to put in her order. Sunflower shakes her head. "I told you to forget about that. But no, I haven't. I was in the field with a coworker. Honestly, I was hoping to see you here, Sequoia." She turns her head towards Hemlock and frowns. "Minus the lummoX, but I don't seem to have much luck these days."

Hemlock wipes her mouth on her sleeve. "Well there's no accounting for taste, toots."

Sunflower raises her eyes to the sky and holds her hands up to her shoulders. "Goddess above, smite this fool for me." She turns to Sequoia, her expression blank. "I wanted to ask you some questions, Sequoia. In return, I think I can help you with your ID problem."

"Really? We were just talking about that this morning. Sure, Sunflower, I don't mind answering some questions. Just so long as they aren't super rude."

"I'll do my best. When you were summoned up here, what was it like?" Sunflower blows the steam off her coffee and starts to sip.

Sequoia raises a finger and closes her eyes. "IF I was summoned. Which honestly I don't think I was. When we're summoned, we get an alert letting us know we're coming up. If we didn't, we wouldn't be prepared to face a summoner. When I came up here, it was like... Hey Hemlock, what were those things a movie's made up of?"

"Frames."

Sequoia nods. "Frames. It was like frames in a movie. One frame, I'm sitting on my bed in my dorm, reading a book, and the next frame I'm falling on my ass inside the catacombs under the school. No circle, no summoner, no bands." and she points to her neck and wrists. "Just empty catacombs stretching before me. So I don't even think I *was* summoned here. It wasn't like it was supposed to be at all. Do you want to hear my theory?"

Sarah comes back with a plate of toast and sunny side eggs. Sunflower places an egg on a slice of toast and takes a bite. "Can't wait."

"So like I was telling the other three, my creator, Mahog, always told me stories of the world before the Reveal and about topsiders and their culture. I always always wanted to see what it was like here, in a reality of limitations and compromise, but endless possibilities and beauty. So over the years I just mentally kept pushing and pushing on that thick membrane that separates dreams from reality without really knowing it like our Boss did way



way way back in that timeless era only the deepest stones have a record of, harder than any demon had since our banishment, and I finally got through. Metaphorically, anyways, it's not like there's this gooey barrier that says 'This way to the material plane!' Actually it's kinda weird, it perfectly matches what Lily was saying the other day about us being the pennies that leapt out of the well of Penny District."

Sunflower washes down her food with some coffee. "I... see. I guess that explains why you... don't have any hostility towards us. You weren't doing anything out of the ordinary? No one helped you along?"

"Nope. Just lying down in my dorm, reading about the oceans up here, and pop, there I was, in the catacombs."

"And you spoke to no one at the college at any length, correct?"

"Nope. Well, except one."

"Oh? What was their name?"

"Snooker."

Sunflower's head droops. "That cat that hangs around the commissary? I should've known."

Sequoia laughs. "You know him? Wow, you really are super good at your job!"

Sunflower shakes her head and places the other egg on the last slice of toast. “Don’t remind me. Last question. Have you felt any urge to return to the college?”

Sequoia slurps the last of the milkshake through the straw, creating a wet gurgling noise. She breaks off and shakes her head. “Nope, none at all. That place is gross and gives me the creeps. Also holds some kinda traumatic memories I don’t really wanna deal with right now. I’d like to stay as far away from that place as possible. Besides, why would I want to when there’s a buncha cool old worn out books in the van that I haven’t even begun to read? When there’s horseshoe crabs to save and washed up jellyfish to poke at or weird shells to collect or non-horseshoe crabs to watch scuttle around or a thousand other things in town that isn’t some stuffy quasi-fascist college for big world people? And before you ask, no, no compelling urge to travel anywhere in particular. Just... wanna see as much as I possibly can. Uhm, are you still worried about me being up here?”

“No, Sequoia. I’m just following up on... rumors floating around the guildhouse last night. ...You answered my questions straight and fair. To show my appreciation...” and Sunflower reaches into her army jacket and pulls out a folded slip of paper. “Here. I still have some clout with the Coalition and I have no faith that the four of you could come up with anything remotely approaching plausible.”

Sequoia takes the paper and unfolds it. “Attn: Department of Information Clerk. Please go along with whatever dumbass story these bozos push. I’ve already vetted Sequoia and verified her story. Get Maggie if you have to, she’ll vouch for me. Signed, Sunflower.’ And then a seal to prove you wrote it, I’m guessing. Wait, seriously?”

Sunflower lowers the coffee from her lips and wraps her hands around the cup, setting it on the counter. “Consider us even for your big dumb speech last night. And... for...” and she trails off.

Sequoia puts a hand to her ear and leans towards Sunflower. “Huh? What’s that?”

Barely audibly, Sunflower mutters “For putting on a passable show.”

Hemlock nearly does a spit take. Sequoia’s eyes grow as wide as her smile. “Really?! You liked it?!”

Sunflower’s face grows red. “Don’t get me wrong, if it weren’t for your... effects, it would’ve been dull as paint drying.”

“Haha, whatever. Keep playing tough. Thanks Sunflower.” Sequoia leans forward, looks past Sunflower, and waves the note at Hemlock. “Toldja, Lock. She really does have a big heart.”

Hemlock takes a swig of her seltzer. “Probably just some warrior’s code bullshit.”

Sunflower glares at her. "I hope you get your head stuck in that glass." She turns back to Sequoia, still expressionless. "Tell me, Sequoia, are all demons like you?"

Sequoia thinks for a few moments before shaking her head. "Not really, but not like you're thinking either. Mostly, they're kind of cowardly? They're very afraid of anything upsetting the balance within Hell and attracting Cecilia's ire. Folks just fall in line and hope that repeating the same things we've been doing for thousands upon thousands of years will cause things to change. It won't. That's probably really why I'm up here, I'm a rebellious little punk, constantly pranking people even in Hell. I bet The Boss got tired of me and tossed me out on my ass. Cecilia's problem to deal with now." She runs her finger along the empty rim of her glass, then licks off the small amount of milkshake. "We were never evil, Sunflower. We simply wanted to play with the big kids and we were stomped down for it. Most history is written by bullies, after all. Even 'demon' is just the Cecilian term for a certain race of mischievous sprites from a lower dimension. We certainly didn't choose for Cecilia to saddle us with punishing the worst people up here. We only fear what she'll do to us if we don't. But don't worry, I was just a student in a university pact summoning course. I have nothing to do with any of that. I'm not even allowed in the Business District. I haven't the foggiest about what they actually *do* there."

Sunflower shakes her head slowly. "I'm sorry if I caused offense. And... I..." Her face grows red again. "I want to apologize for how I acted the other day. I can see now you aren't a threat to anyone. You're right, I let my pride and my fears get the better of me. You have to understand. The mundane world doesn't have access to your particular... insight. We only know what scripture and legend tells us. And... to see something so impossible as you..."

Sequoia puts a hand on Sunflower's shoulder, which is immediately shrugged off. "Don't worry, like I said, I get how people see me. You don't have to go dredging up those memories. I get you're probably traumatized by what happened in Rainsoaked. If it's any consolation, I believe the official story too. So whaddya say, Sunflower? Friends? You wouldn't have to talk to Hemlock any different-"

"Hey!"

"-because we rip on each other all the time and it's all in jest. That's what friends do. And... I think that's why you and Lock rip on each other each time you meet. You two may not realize it, but it's what I believe. So how about you leave the acting to the actors and the foolishness to the fools and... just admit it'd be nice to be friends? You wouldn't have taken the time to try to understand me or apologize if you didn't want that."

Sunflower stares at the plate of crumbs and grease in front of her. "I'll... think about it. For now let's just say... truce?"

Sequoia slaps the bar and laughs. "I'll take it. Oh right! An apology!" She makes a show of patting herself down and searching her pockets. "Sorry, I don't have that metal sunflower on me. If you wanna come back to the van with us-"

Sunflower continues to stare down the crumbs. None of them move. "Keep it. As... a reminder of that day."

Sequoia tosses a few bills on the counter, stands up, and stretches. "Phew, I was hoping you'd say that. It really goes with my suit. Well, we should probably get going. There's other stuff in town I wanted to do before we get back to the van." She leans in close and talks behind her hand in a loud whisper. "(Some advice between friends, don't get too close to the west gate. Oak's a screamer, and I bet that cat can yowl.)" She winks at Sunflower.

Sunflower is unable to reign in her snicker. "Snrk. Noted. I... guess I'll... see you around, Sequoia... Hemlock."

Hemlock gets up and rubs the back of her neck nervously. "Uh, yeah, see... you around I guess?"

Sequoia wraps her arm around Hemlock's waist and leads her to the exit. "C'mon, Lock. Let's go see how close we can get to the ocean without a big wave hitting us.

Then we can watch some boats come into the docks!” She puts her hand on the knob of the tavern’s door, turns, and slips her arm off Hemlock so she can wave back at Sunflower. “Take care, Sunflower! It was good talking to you! You should come to tomorrow’s show! I’m not sure if The Marksman is your thing, but I promise it at least won’t be as dull as paint drying! See you then.” and she steps out into the brightness of day, Hemlock following closely behind.

Sarah makes a show of cleaning a mug with a rag. Sarah has definitely watched a lot of cartoons with bartenders in them. “Why don’t you just admit you’re dizzy for that sweet gal? There’s no sense trying to fool a bartender on matters of the heart, y’know.”

Sunflower props her head on her hand and closes her eyes, frowning. “Oh hush. Gimme another coffee.”

## Chapter 13

The narrow alleyways and side streets leading from the Boar to Feymist Ave are by design. For one, it’s all Harvey could afford at the time. Town square and Feymist Ave are high demand areas, and property values spike dramatically the closer you get to them. For another, if it was in town square or on Feymist Ave, it would attract all

manner of people. Tourists, the lunch crowd, people in suits making business decisions on cell phones looking for happy hour deals on drinks and appetizers while they hustle for even more wealth. Unbearable. But in the end, it's mostly about feeling safe. Being away from the prying eyes of the public, in their own dingy area just on the edge of Penny District, gals can feel safe and secure going there. It's their own small little world, the best kept secret in all of Feymist. So when Hemlock darts her head around to make sure she isn't followed, it's not entirely paranoia. Mostly it is. She looks over her shoulder and down at Sequoia. "I can't believe that just happened."

Sequoia pulls the cuffs of her flannel shirt over her hands, gripping them by the edge, stretching the sleeves taught. She lets her hands fall to her sides, the oversized cuffs still covering her hands. "I keep telling you, you just gotta find the third way. You don't always have to choose between a fight and being arrested. Shut off your brain and open your heart and you'll see it."

Hemlock laughs. "Well at least I got that first part down." They turn off an alley and onto Feymist Ave proper, gravitating towards the boards.

Sequoia looks up at Hemlock. "Not to change the subject, but Sunny's questions got me thinking... What's with that college anyways? It seems kinda... outta place in such a mellow seeming town."



Hemlock scoffs. “Probably because it is. Feymist was a town way way before there was ever a Feymist University. It was a pretty small town, pretty much just a few shops on a street by the ocean, a much bigger dock, and a few homes, and those catacombs were ruins leftover from back during the Reveal. The Crossguard Guild had a branch here even back then, but not in the same spot. Mostly they were there to protect the dock, guard transports of goods, and ensure that the monsters from the wilds didn’t start sniffing around to where people were. About three hundred years ago, some dumbass had the bright idea to build a college dedicated to magic and arcane research right over the catacombs. Claimed that Feymist was an ‘unrealized font of arcane energy’ or some bullshit like that. Around that same time, other ports along the eastern seaboard like South Gate and Deuter became much more important and viable. So the town shifted gears from a sleepy lil town that only existed because of the docks to a sleepy larger town that is only big because of the college.”

“So why did the town get bigger? Seems to me the college would’ve expanded instead, until all of this was just the college.”

“Cuz visitors ain’t allowed, not even a student’s family. Most everyone up there lives at the college. Coming and going from the college when you ain’t there on business like I was is damn near like going to another continent.

Tons of paperwork and documents and shit, which is why most students live on campus. The college added other, normal studies to their curriculum, and it became one of the most important colleges on the continent, attracting students from all over. Families started settling the town proper to be near their kids, and they started seeing the tourist appeal to a beach community, so they created the post of Mayor and formed a small local government with the goal of keeping the college contained within its own walls. Like a bonsai tree. Which the college didn't really care about. They have their 'wellspring of arcane energy' and are satisfied with that. Goddamn bipolar town, caught between two conflicting ways of life with people like us and tourists thrown in for flavor."

Sequoia goes into thinking mode. "But why the hostility? Why the security? It's just a college. I get that colleges want you to pay tuition and junk but it seems really... extreme."

Hemlock shakes her head. "Damned if I know. I always assumed they got some top secret government level research going on there. Colleges ain't just institutions of learning, they're also research centers. This one's the most advanced and the largest on the continent, so it makes sense that it'd have a buncha government contracts like that. Still seems a bit out of place, but that's reality for you. Confusing nonsense that has the decency to allow you to wonder and dream." She

bends down and takes off her boots, tying the laces together and hanging them around her neck as she walks down the steps from the boards to the beach.

Sequoia does the same with her hi-tops. They walk in silence towards the ocean, and walk past the edge where the wake laps at the sand. They roll up their pant legs, wriggle their feet into the mud and the wake washes over them, sucking out mud as it recedes, washing in mud as it swells. Sequoia has a quiet, subdued smile on her face. “Things really are weird and complicated and wonderful up here. Thanks, Lock.” She looks up at her friend, craning her neck a bit to meet her eyes. “So what else do we gotta do today? We still got posters to hang, but I feel like we’re missing something.”

“That’s why I was saying we should hit up the docks last. We gotta buy a fuel cell from that shop. Slipped Lily’s mind when we were at the shop the other day.” She pats over the breast pocket of her coat. “Thankfully, Lily gave us a note to hand to them so we don’t have to stammer and look like dummies when they start asking questions.”

“Why last? Is it super heavy?”

“Nope. It’s super dangerous.”

“Dangerous?”

Hemlock gazes out to the horizon, eyes tracking a ship barely visible in the distance. “Yep. They contain the

energy real well but if you get too much heat around it, or slam it against something hard enough, PKWWSH! Giant explosion. 'Course, most folks don't actually handle them, a mechanic does, and if they do, they don't go about burning things near the cells or slamming them against rocks with a sledgehammer and shit for that reason. Still tho, the less time near that shit I have to be, the better."

Sequoia shakes her head and looks down at the waves crashing. "That sounds... super like something they shouldn't just hand to people. What happens if a car or van collides with another vehicle?"

Hemlock looks down at Sequoia and makes her eyes wide. "Boom." They stare each other down, neither making a sound. Seagulls caw above them. Finally, Hemlock cracks. "Pffft haha ok that time you got me. Let's play whist tonight. You and me in a partnership against Lily and Oak. I may actually beat Lily for once. In all seriousness, that explosion can sometimes happen, but for the most part the energy is contained well enough. You hear about accidents from time to time that cause an explosion but it's pretty rare. That doesn't mean wrecks ain't deadly tho. Damn vehicles give me the creeps."

Sequoia grins as she looks out to sea, taking in the totality of the atmosphere. "The mighty Hemlock, son of Wolan, is afraid of technology? I never would've guessed. I know you said you were from a small village but it must have really been out in the sticks."

Hemlock snorts. “Hey now, it ain’t like I’m technophobic. It’s just goddamn vehicles. That ‘perfect cycle’ crap Lily was talking about that first night is missing a critical flaw: the land along all them roads vehicles drive on are dried up and dying. Vehicles don’t appear to give off any harmful energy or smoke, but I promise you they do. The research into it is repressed by the state, I believe it down to my bones. You watch a new road get put in, and within a year the grass is all brittle and dry and not even weeds can grow. Even with the whole trash exchange program, people still throw junk on the side of the road, causing even more pollution. Then you got the loss of life from wrecks, people not paying attention and hitting civilians... Hell, I promise you the thing that’s gonna finally do me in is that damn intersection just past Knoll Ave. Assholes don’t even know you can’t turn left there despite the huge blinking sign and don’t watch for walkers like us. The only convenient thing about vehicles is it doesn’t take you a month to get anywhere anymore. That doesn’t mean the cost is worth it.”

“Yeah, and we wouldn’t be able to travel around like we do.”

Hemlock shrugs. “So? The traveling’s good, don’t get me wrong, and it keeps us from getting stale, but I’d rather we get an old fashioned wagon and kick it here three months of the year, head up to Yama and kick it there for three months, and lastly hit up Brechdan for

three months, then repeat the cycle. Those are the three towns we really cleanup anyways. Those other towns, they're real nice, especially Plankspire for someone like me, and I love everywhere we go, even the backwards places where Lily and Oak expressing their love is frowned on. Everywhere's got their own history and stories and beauty. But it ain't worth killing the land and each other for. Not that we've ever gotten in a wreck or hit anyone, Lily's an ace driver. Her old man taught her too well to be anything else. Y'just never know what some other maniac is gonna do."

"Yeah, I see what you mean. I kinda get nervous every time I'm in the road, even in those crossed walks." Sequoia laughs and somehow manages to peel her gaze away from the sea and up at Hemlock. "That's why I always stick close to you! They could miss tiny gals like the three of us but no way can they miss you!"

Hemlock rips out a good belly laugh. "Why d'y'think I'm so huge? I'm like a moose, if you hit me, it's your ass."

They both laugh and stare out at the ocean for a long few minutes, not saying anything. Nothing needs to be said. Nature does the talking for them. Still, Sequoia gets bored easily. "It's so nice to bury my feet in the mud like this and feel the waves wash over my legs and feet. I can feel the water rushing over them even through the mud. Like it washes the mud out and then sucks in new mud."

Hemlock smiles warmly and crosses her arms. “Yeah, it’s the greatest. The hot springs up in Yama are great, but nothing beats this feeling. I’m glad you get it. Some folks are too scared to even do this.”

“Really? That’s kinda sad. Not in the ‘that’s pathetic’ way, but in the ‘what a shame’ way. Is it because of jellyfish and other critters?”

Hemlock nods, bends over and picks up some sea glass. She hurtles it into the ocean. “Yep. Some folks are just plain scared of ocean life because of how alien it is to just about everything on land, but mostly it’s jellyfish. Jellyfish stings hurt like hell and they’re real scared when they wash up. They just flail and sting anything close by. That’s never happened to any of us, tho. Despite the amount of jellies we see washed up, I feel like that’s a pretty rare occurrence. Jellies, y’see, don’t like light mostly. They swim down where there’s not so much light to spawn, and drift on the currents to catch food after that. They get too close to land tho, and the current takes them to shore.”

Sequoia stuffs her hands in her pockets and bends forwards and backwards, pivoting on her ankles. “So out there somewhere there’s this big massive collection of jellies getting down and rocking out. That’s real beautiful to think about. I could walk this Earth for a thousand years and not have the smallest inkling of the vast majority of activity going on because it’s all underwater. ... I really love

it up here, Lock. I don't mean to keep harping on that but it's just... so overwhelmingly beautiful and interesting."

Hemlock wraps her arm around Sequoia's shoulder and pulls her close to her. "We love having you up here, Coy. That charm and that ID will help ensure you stay here. Is Hell really that awful?"

Sequoia wraps her own arm around Hemlock's waist and is silent for a minute or two. She gazes wistfully out to sea. "...I don't care if anyone's listening or watching right now. In fact I hope she is, so she can know what she's doing to us. Besides, I think there are things about those runes you're not telling me. Hell's a place where nothing happens, Lock. There's classes and social clubs and etc but it feels so lifeless and hollow, so... bland and uniform. Everything feels forced, like we're running on a script ingrained into our brains. There isn't this teeming mysterious world of life anywhere there. It's just... a parody of reality without a punchline. And that's not even talking about the changes Cecilia made. There's a reason we left home, y'know. Then like... just how *behind* we are on the world and its history, it's... it's part of what makes it Hell instead of home."

Hemlock reaches over with her other arm and pets Sequoia's head between her horns. Her voice is barely audible over the crashing waves. "...That's about all you should say probably. Thanks for telling me all that, Coy. It means a lot to me. I won't tell the others. Probably safer



that way. Don't worry gal, you ain't going nowhere." Hemlock slips her arms off Sequoia and folds them in front of her. Her voice rises to her usual booming cadence. "Besides back up to the boards so we can rinse the sand off our feet and let 'em dry as we walk to the docks. It's getting to be about time for us to start hanging more posters before heading back."

Sequoia wilts slightly. "Aw man..." She picks herself back up and smiles brightly. "Ah well. That means we can watch the boats come in! That long pier looked like the perfect place to set up for a few minutes."

Hemlock laughs. "Nothing keeps you down long, does it? You're speaking my language, girl. Let's boogey."

Sequoia rinses her feet using one of the many public sprinklers lining the boardwalk, totally ignoring her ability to simply clean them.

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The sun dances on the calm sea the dock is slapped over. Some clouds pass lazily in front of it, darkening the sky slightly. Lunch break. Sequoia and Hemlock walk out of the parts and repair shop, minus one poster and plus one fuel cell. Sequoia holds the glowing hunk of metal up to her face, staring at it. It glows a pale, unnatural blue. "It's beautiful, even moreso than glow sticks. I didn't know what to expect, but it certainly wasn't something like this."

Hemlock rolls her eyes. “Anything that bright and colorful is dangerous if you ask me. Like poison arrow frogs or most dangerous snakes. I guess it does have its charm tho.” Hemlock nods out to sea and points, Sequoia following her finger. “Check it out, here comes one now.”

Sequoia slips the fuel cell into the backpack and her eyes go wide. Her whole body tracks the huge ship pulling into the dock. The masts of the ship tower over anything Sequoia’s ever seen before. She cranes her neck up to gaze at them. Workers scramble, putting up bumpers, grabbing the lines the crew of the ship tosses down, tying them fast to cleats and pilings. “...Whoa.”

Hemlock laughs. “Just ‘whoa’?”

“... ...Whoa.”

Hemlock puts her hand on Sequoia’s shoulder. “Finally speechless, eh? If you think that’s cool, duck your head down under the dock and look at the pilings near the water.” and she points to the end of the pier.

Sequoia sprints to the end of the pier, Hemlock following slowly behind. Sequoia gets on her hands and knees and bends down, her head and shoulders ducking under the dock, her hair flopped over and the tips grazing the water. There, on the piling, both above and below the water, are some blue crabs scuttling about. They pick barnacles off the piling and bring them to what you can only assume to be their mouths. One crab starts to scuttle

up the piling quickly. A tentacle reaches out from the darkness of the water, wraps around the crab, and pulls it down, bits of shell floating to the surface moments later. Sequoia's eyes may not have ever gotten this big before. "W-whoa." Hemlock stands over her and looks down in the water. The water churns slightly, and a purplish mass rushes up to the surface of the water. A glistening yellow eye opens, darts around, and the mass is off again, diving deep, its tentacles and a cloud of ink trailing behind it. Sequoia lifts up her head from under the dock, the front of her hair dripping down her face, and she starts laughing madly. "Did you see that?! It looked right at me! That was incredible! It looked so squishy and weird, like... Like... aaah that was amazing!"

Hemlock laughs gently and shakes her head. "Some girls have all the luck. I'm gonna take that as a sign of good luck and that we should probably get going. Whaddya say, time to head home?"

Sequoia whips her head around, shaking some of the excess water out of her hair. It doesn't help much. She stands up and takes Hemlock's arm, leading her forward. "Yeah! I *gotta* tell the other two about everything that's happened so far! I can't wait!"

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It's not that Lily isn't listening, it's just that she's trying to make sure she doesn't burn lunch. Tips were good but...

you can't eat at the Boar every meal. Her back's to the other three as Sequoia gushes about her morning in Feymist. She tosses the rice and vegetables in the pan, stirring them quickly with chopsticks, her ears perked on the conversation behind her. Sequoia speaks animatedly about her day to the rapt audience of Oak, and the somewhat distant attention of Hemlock, continuing her whittling. She talks about the guild wall, talking with Sunflower, the octopus, everything. Mostly everything. She leaves out the conversation about Hell. Lily holds the pan in one hand, four stacked bowls with chopsticks laid across them in the other, and sets the pan down on a stump, passing out the bowls and chopsticks. She starts scooping up some of the food into her own bowl. "Sounds like soooomebody's project is going along smoothly."

Sequoia grapples with the chopsticks, struggling to get food into the bowl. "Project?"

"You and Suuuunflower."

Sequoia rolls her eyes, not at Lily but in frustration with the food. She waits for the others to fill their bowls and then tilts the pan over her bowl, using the chopsticks to scoop some in. "Well, I-"

Lily leans in, a smug grin on her face, waving her head. "Coy Coy already heeeeeeel over heeeeeeels over some babe." She expertly pulls up a mouthful of food.

Hemlock kicks backwards and raises her arms. “Finally, I’m free! Thanks for taking that heat off me, Coy, consider us even for the catacombs!”

“Hehe. Well, I’ll take a truce.” Lily shrugs. “Not like we ever do anything to instigate with her anyways, it’s always her starting shit.”

Oak shakes her head. “I’ll take being ignored by her any day of the week. While you were away we-”

Sequoia grins up at Oak. “Boinked like crazy? Was it two or three hours of the time we were gone?” She sighs as she drops the food she miraculously balanced on the chopsticks back into the bowl and opts for the “lift the bowl to her mouth and shovel it in with the chopsticks” approach.

Oak looks down into her bowl, stirring the food nervously. “H-hey! Th-that’s... That’s just... It was more like two. Anyways, we were talking about what to tell the Department of Information about why you’re not in the system and don’t have a letter from the KnoCs. See, your parents, Poplar and Ash Petticorn-”

“Who?”

“The people on your birth certificate listed as your parents.” Oak shrugs as she pops a carrot slice in her mouth. “We had to make up *something*. Anyways, they never had any IDs because they lived in a commune way

out in the boonies outside of Yama. The only reason you have a birth cert is because it was a complicated birth and they needed to go to a hospital for it.”

Lily playfully shrugs, closing her eyes and grinning. “Who knows if those’re even their real names?”

Oak mimes Lily. “Sounds kinda phony and made up to me, Lily. Probably just trying to dodge the hospital bills. Anyways, they couldn’t care for you and, ashamed, left you in the care of the commune, and went off somewhere else, never to be heard from again. The commune broke up when you were a teenager after a ritual mishap, classic, and because the commune broke up the KnoCs couldn’t find you. Since then you’ve been like this and eventually got picked up by us and have been traveling with us since, learning our craft, and are finally ready to perform. The only reasons you’re getting an ID now are because of your run in with Sunflower and so you can pay your taxes like a responsible citizen.”

Sequoia lowers the bowl and laughs, a rice kernel stuck to the corner of her mouth. “Seriously? That’s... some story. It might not hold up against scrutiny, so I’m glad I have this letter from Sunflower.” And she reaches into her pocket and waves the note at Oak.

“Letter? Lemme see.” Lily puts down her empty bowl and reaches for the note. Sequoia hands it to her, and she reads it aloud. “Attn: Department of yadda yadda... Please

go along blah blah... I'm a huge jerk yadda yadda.' Seriously, would it kill her to do something nice for a change without insulting us? Well whatever, this will help at least. I figure we should probably go today. By the time we get there, it'll be about closing time and they'll be too eager to leave to give us much static. So how about it, Coy? Ready to get your picture taken and be processed into the system?"

Sequoia puts down her own empty bowl and sighs. "Not particularly, but it's not like I have a choice either. Let's tear off this bandage." Excitement creeps back into her face. "Oh, maybe I can make a real goofy face at the last second! Then when I show Sunny my ID next time we meet she won't be able to help but laugh."

Lily shakes her head. "Man, I was just fooling but you got it bad for that jerk, don't you?"

"No way. Well, maybe. I just want to prove to her that art and love is more powerful than anger and authority, and that she can leave that life behind her."

"Loooooove is it?" Lily teases with a smirk.

"Platonic love. As in, for all things. And stuff." Sequoia huffs. "You know what I mean!"

"Hehe." Lily heads towards the driver side door of the van before turning back to Sequoia. "Oh right, this is your

first time riding in a vehicle, isn't it? Why don't you sit up front with me and 'co-pilot'?"

"Co-pilot?"

"Well, you don't really have to do anything. You can just look out the window at the world zipping by as we drive. Too bad it's not warm enough to roll the windows down."

"That sounds like fun. Man, my first time outside of Feymist!"

Oak heads towards the van's door. "It's weird, it's technically in another town but it's still called the Feymist branch of the DMV. I guess Feymist is the only noteworthy town in the area. Feymist is technically just the area around the college, but the sprawling areas outside of Feymist are often confused with it. The distinction between towns blur more than the borders of countries. We usually just refer to Feymist as 'downtown' and the outlying areas as 'Feymist proper'."

"Then... my first time outside of downtown?"

"You got it. Ready to head out?"

Sequoia wraps her arm around Oak's shoulders and walks with her to the van. "You know it girly."

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The van pulls into a parking lot with a smattering of cars in it. They take up several parking spaces, but then, there aren't enough people to care either. Another reason to go right before they close. Sequoia steps out of the van's passenger side door and wobbles, leaning heavily against the side of the van. Lily exits the van and walks around the front and wraps her arm around Sequoia, who bends over. She shakes her head. "Now I understand why Hemlock hates vehicles so much. I feel like the world is moving under my feet still."

Lily rubs Sequoia's back. "Was the ride really that bumpy? I know the van doesn't have the best shocks but..."

"It wasn't the bumpiness, it was just the whole thing. Wugh. I feel like I just changed the reality of a mountain."

Oak clambers out the passenger seat door and hooks an arm under Sequoia's. "That's called 'motion sickness'. It'll fade in time, Coy. You just got to get used to riding in a vehicle. You cool to go in, or should we sit for a few minutes?"

Sequoia shakes her head and stands up straight. "I'll be alright. Is Hemlock really just gonna stay in the van the whole time?"

Oak has her arm around Sequoia's back, helping to prop her up as they walk towards the building. "Yeah, she

can't stand this place. 'Feels like every eye on the continent is watching me' she says."

"Lucky devil. Oh well. Let's just get this over with."

After a few steps Sequoia's able to walk in her usual slouch without support. The three gals walk into the building and go to a desk labeled "Check-in and Information". The person at the desk looks up from their book and turns to the gals. "May I help you?"

Sequoia heads up to the counter and nervously drums her fingers on the edge of the desk. "Yeah, I need to get an ID. I've never had one."

The clerk frowns and reaches for some papers. "Odd... Do you have your birth certificate and one legal document proving your identity?"

Sequoia pulls Oak's forgery out of her pocket along with Sunflower's note. "I have one of those, at least. Uhm. I have a notarized note excusing me from the other?"

"May I see?" The clerk looks over each document. In the background, Oak gulps nervously as the clerk examines the birth certificate. "This checks out. Take a number, have a seat, fill out this form, and wait for your number to be called." And they nod to the ticket dispenser and pass a clipboard with a piece of paper and a pen clipped to it to Sequoia.

Sequoia tugs a number free from the dispenser and finds a seat in the back, Lily and Oak sitting to either side of her. She folds her legs and props the clipboard up with them. Lily nudges Sequoia with her elbow. “What number didja get?”

“Sixty-seven.”

Lily tilts her head back. “So close...”

Sequoia looks around her. To say the inside of the building is unimpressive is an understatement. Even to someone like Sequoia who hasn't been to many places, this place is dull. Gray paint on the walls, gray chairs, gray dividers at each pale gray counter. No art adorns the walls, only notices and information. There's not so much as a potted plant. Magazines and newspapers are stuffed into a rack against the wall, the only artifacts indicating this culture has even heard of art. The most exciting thing is the red digital readout indicating what number is due at the service window. It currently reads sixty-one. “So this is the Department of Information? It's... a little underwhelming.”

Oak shakes her head. “Nah, this is just a branch of the Division of Motor Vehicles. The DMV falls under the purview of the DoI. The actual DoI building is in Brechdan, in Hapke, which is the continent's capital. It'd be unfair and inefficient to make everyone travel all the way to the capital, so they have branches on the outskirts of most

major cities and sizable towns that can handle stuff like this.”

Sequoia taps the pen on her chin. “Why not have them in the city proper? Why is it all the way out here to the point we had to drive?”

Lily leans back, putting her hands on the back of her head. “To make this experience worse on everyone.”

Oak tilts her head, validating Lily’s statement. “I think it’s because of zoning laws. Certain areas of each city and its surrounding area are designated spots for things like residential, business, and governmental. It could also be that real estate in the city is too expensive so they put it out where the property’s cheaper to save a few bucks. This section of town has several government buildings like this one, like the Department of Revenue’s Feymist branch.”

Lily shakes her head. “More like they want people to spend the whole day on the bus to get here and back. Everything to do with the government is as complicated and unnecessary as possible, simply to remind people it’s the government you’re dealing with. They want to make you feel like this is vastly more important than it really is. It’s why you have to fill out a bunch of complicated forms and keep tons of documents to pay taxes rather than just getting a bill at the end of the year. Dealing with the government consumes your mind, making you feel like they’re in charge.”

Oak shrugs and nods. "It can be both."

Sequoia shakes her head, looking down at the form. "I don't know if I'll ever get used to how needlessly complicated things are up here."

Lily pats Sequoia's back. "You'll get there. It just takes time and experience."

"I look forward to it. Lessee..." and she uncaps the pen, puts the cap on the bottom of the pen, and puts it to her lips, tapping it. "Why are they asking for all this information if it's already on my birth cert?"

Lily shrugs. "See above."

"Also some folks' birth certs don't match their current identity. This saves some confusion with the clerk when presenting other legal documents proving your actual identity. Like your birth certificate. It lists you as human, which obviously isn't the case... 'anymore'."

"I see. ...Name, Sequoia Virens Petticorn. Birthdate, October 25th 1986. Address... ..."

Lily reaches for the clipboard. "Here, lemme see." She scribbles on the clipboard and hands it back to Sequoia. "That's where my folks live."

"Thanks Lil. Race..." Sequoia shakes her head and frowns. "Hey it's kinda weird they ask for sex and race, right? Like... someone can just use that to discriminate."

What do they care what my sex and race is? Seems a lil gross and unnecessary.”

Lily leans back, kicking her feet out and stuffs her hands in her pockets. “Yep, it sure is. But it’s demographic data, and they gobble that stuff up like it was potato chips.”

“Why are they so obsessed with that stuff?”

Oak shrugs. “No one really knows, honestly. It’s just another one of those things you just accept and live with. I don’t know why it matters how many people there are and what demographic they belong to? Like, what are they gonna do if they feel like there’s too many people, why care about what demographic someone falls under to begin with? It doesn’t make a lot of sense, but that’s the government for you. Maybe it’s because of city planning, but you don’t need to know someone’s sex or race for that, only that they exist. Personally, I think it’s just to provide jobs. Most jobs, such as the ones here, are totally unnecessary and could either be automated or eliminated, but then the government would have to spend money on housing, healthcare, and food for everyone rather than the military and police, and we can’t have that, can we. If people had more of their lives to do what they wanted with, why, how could the government control them?”

A stilted, automated voice comes out of the speakers above them. "Number: 67. Number: 67 to window number: 8. Number: 67 to window number: 8."

Lily puts her hands on her knees and pushes herself up. "That's us. Showtime."

The gals head over to window eight, Sequoia taking a seat and the other two leaning against the dividers on either side of the window. The clerk looks at both of them and clears their throat. "Excuse me, but only the person who has business with the DMV should be at this window. The rest of you, please take a seat."

Sequoia waves a hand in front of her nose. "Nah, it's cool with me if they stay here. They already know everything about me anyways. I need them for... emotional support."

The clerk shrugs and looks at their computer, clicking on spots. "Very well. So, you're here to get an ID? We hardly ever get an adult coming in here needing a completely new one. Why haven't you gotten one before?"

Sequoia folds her arms and looks up, right into a canned light shining down on her. She immediately looks back down, obviously uncomfortable. "So you see... Uhm. So my parents lived in a commune..." She shrugs and digs in her pocket. "Look, I have a note from Sunflower Slipstream."

The clerk's face perks up. "Oh? May I see?" They put their finger under their nose, curling it in front of their smiling lips. "... Snrk. I'll need Maggie to verify this and do an override... And we still have to verify your residence... How about we skip the 'bozo' story and go right to entering in your information while she takes care of that." They pick up a phone and press a few buttons. "Hey Maggie? After you get done calling... the Dampsoils, could you come to window eight? I need you to verify some documents. Thanks." and they hang up. "Wow, an actual note from an actual hero! I'd hold onto that, if I were you. Could be worth something."

Lily hangs her head. "All that brainstorming for nothing..."

"May I see your birth certificate and form 1085?"

Oak fidgets with her tail nervously. A bead of sweat rolls off her temple. Sequoia hands the clerk the clipboard and the forgery. "You mean this form that other clerk gave me?"

"That's the one." They peer at the birth certificate, comparing it to the document in front of them. "...Everything seems to be in order. This will just take a minute or two. ...You're from Yama, eh? How is it up there?"

Oak breathes a sigh of relief and drops her tail. Sequoia rubs the back of her neck. "Uhm. Nice?"



“I’ve never been, personally. Always wanted to try out their hot springs.” They scan the document. “...Human (Variant)? Is that even an option?” They click on some drop down menus and scroll through them. “Huh, whaddya know. Learn something new every day. Just looking at you and your friend, I can see why we have it. Uh. No offense...” and they peer at the document again. “Miss.”

Sequoia shrugs. “None taken. What do they do with this information, anyways?”

A woman comes up to the counter from the other side. “What document did you need me to verify?”

“This note from Sunflower Slipstream. She drops your name in it.”

“Oh? Been awhile since I heard that name.” and she takes Sunflower’s letter and looks it over. “Yep, that’s her seal alright. Gotta remember to catch up with her one of these days. Go ahead and accept this, I already verified with the Dampsoils that she lives there.” She looks at her watch and starts to walk away. “Not worth staying late over nothing anyways.”

Sequoia lets her breath out. The clerk begins typing. “Uhm. So what do they do with this information, anyways?”

“Oh! Sorry, forgot your question. They store it in a central database.”

“Why?”

“So they can reference it for later.”

“For what?”

The clerk gets a face that indicates they’re wondering if Sequoia is actually three years old. “Y’know, no one’s ever asked me that before. I guess I don’t really know. Probably has something to do with taxes. That’s all set. Would you like to register to vote?”

“Vote for what?”

Lily nods. “Yes, you do. We’ll explain later.”

The clerk struggles to keep from shaking their head. “(Why do I get all the weird ones...) Would you like to be an organ donor?”

Sequoia recoils. “No way, I want all my parts right where they are.”

Lily does the shaking of the head for the clerk. “It’s not like they take them from you right now, Coy. Just, if you die, they give your organs to people in need of transplants. We’re all organ donors.”

Oak puts a finger to her chin and glances away from the canned lighting. “I honestly don’t know if you *can* be an organ donor tho. You’ll be dead anyways...”

Sequoia shakes her own head. "This is too gross to talk about. Let's just say yes and move on. If I beef it, some lucky soul will get cool special demon guts."

Lily slaps Sequoia's shoulder and hisses out "Coy!"

Sequoia's eyes roll up in her head, pressing the part of her brain that should remember to not talk about being a demon. "I mean, weird *human* guts. *Not* demon guts."

The poor clerk is lost. "Uhm? (Only twenty minutes til the end of my shift... move it along...) Now, Miss Petticorn, if you'll step over here," and they indicate where Oak's standing. Oak moves to behind the chair and Sequoia slouches in front of the empty gray space. A small device with a lens lowers from the ceiling, by far the most interesting thing that's happened so far. It points at Sequoia. "Face the camera... Head down a bit... Could you move the hair away from your, uhm, horns more? And out of your eyes."

Sequoia swipes her hand across her hair, trying to get it to behave. "That's as good as it's gonna get, friend."

"That'll do. Smile if you wish." Flash. "There. You can have a seat if you want, it should only take a minute to print. Have you lived in Yama your whole life?"

Sequoia sits down, Oak and Lily resuming their spots. "Nope. I've nev-"

Lily cuts her off, already anticipating Sequoia's slip up. "She took a few years off to travel. See the continent, y'know?"

"I'm sooooo jealous. I've always wanted to do that. What's your favorite place you've been to?"

Sequoia tilts her head. "Feymist I guess?" Sequoia's still getting used to the idea of small talk.

"Good taste. I love it here. Kinda boring in the off season, tho." A machine on the counter starts making some buzzing noises, and out from a slot pops a thin, rigid piece of plastic. The clerk takes it and hands it to Sequoia. "...Alright, here you are, Miss Petticorn, your brand new ID and your paperwork. You all have yourselves a pleasant day." The clerk puts up a sign that says "This window closed." and starts typing and clicking on their computer.

The gals walk away from the window and into the lobby. Lily peers around Sequoia from the side. "I wanna see!" Sequoia hands her the ID. On it is a goofy picture of Sequoia trying to look normal, and her personal information. "Aw, you didn't make a face after all."

Sequoia laughs. "I was too nervous!"

Lily passes the ID to Oak, who laughs. "You still look goofy. I swear that camera's cursed to always make everyone look their worst. It's so weird to see your horns so prominently." She hands it back to Sequoia, who just looks

at it for a long few moments, saying nothing. Oak wraps her arm around her shoulder. "What's wrong?"

Sequoia shakes her head. "Nothing, really. Just feels weird looking at this. Not bad, just... weird. Like I'm more... solid, more real. Kinda validating in a way, y'know?"

Oak nods. "Yeah, I felt that way too. Welcome to the Windswept continent, fellow citizen."

"Pffft haha, dork. C'mon, let's go home and show Hemlock." She looks down at the card, turning it over as she walks, not watching where she's going. "Are we going back to the campsite?"

Lily holds the door open for Sequoia so she doesn't bonk into it. "Yeah, but we have to make a stop at the fuel exchange depot to refill our water and fuel and dump our waste for conversion. That's why we drove here instead of taking the bus."

"They convert your waste into fuel but don't just give you the fuel?"

"Nope! It sucks, but so it goes. At least it's being used instead of wasted. They give you a break on taxes at the end of the year if you keep track of how much waste you exchange, which of course we do. Wanna ride up front again?"

"No way. It's mattress city for me, baby."

Lily opens the driver's side door, Oak circling around to the passenger side. "Well, you'll get used to it eventually. Once we're on the road, it'll all even out in due time." She hops up into the driver's seat, Oak shutting the door of the passenger side as she gets in. Sequoia goes through the side door, and crawls up onto a mattress and pulls a blanket around her.

Hemlock waves. "Miss anything fun?"

The van lurches forward. Sequoia grips the blanket. "Nah, not really. If that's not the most boring place on the continent, I'll eat my shirt. Check it out." and she passes the card to Hemlock.

"Man, they made you show your horns? I swear they have some way of knowing how you prefer to look, so they can make you do the opposite." She passes back the card. "Did they give you any static?"

"Nope, it went pretty smoothly all in all." The van hits a bump. "Urk."

"You doing ok over there, kiddo?"

"Just... getting used to vehicles is all. So what do I do about taxes?"

"Nothing. Lily handles all that. All you gotta do is sign some papers at the end of the year."

“Seriously? That seems kinda unfair. I should at least learn some of it to help her out.”

Hemlock shakes her head. “She doesn’t mind. It’s easier that way. Oak and I tried to do our own one year and when we handed them to Lily for review, she just shook her head sadly and tore them up. Finances are easier the less heads you get involved. Lily handles the business side of things, it’s just how it goes.”

“Still seems imbalanced, especially when she cooks too. Gotta find a way to lighten the load a bit.” Everything in the van shifts around as Lily hugs a tight turn. “urp” Sequoia pulls the blankets over her head.

Hemlock scoots forward and taps the lump under the blankets with her foot. “You sure you’re doing ok?”

A muffled voice comes from the mass. “My stomach feels weird, like it’s about to twist itself into a knot and there’s a lot of water in my mouth.”

Hemlock’s eyes go wide and she whips the blankets off, pulling Sequoia up and putting her arm under hers. “Oh shit, you’re about to spew. C’mon over to the bathroom girly, I’ll help you through it.”

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Campfires are nice, but there’s some things you just want to be inside for. Like cards. It’s hard to play cards with folks when there’s a fire where the table ought to be. Even

harder when your fingers get all numbed up from the early spring chill. Sometimes, it's worth it to get comfy in some sweats, turn on a space heater, and enjoy some incandescent lighting. It helps when that's where your record player is, too. The sound of cards slapping against the middle mattress barely pierces through the saxophone coming from the record player. "Hehe, that's five gals." and Lily scoops the leftover noodles from the pot into her and Oak's bowls, and they clink their dishes together. A prize well earned.

Sequoia hangs her head. "Man I was looking forward to seconds..."

Hemlock crosses her arms. "Good luck. These two have hustled me outta more seconds than I have hairs on my head."

Sequoia collects the cards and shuffles them before putting them back in the pack. "How did you play three player whist anyway?"

Hemlock takes a pull off her bottle of beer. "We didn't, we played skat mostly. These two are just sharks."

Oak twirls some noodles around her fork and laughs. "You'd think after seven years Hemlock would improve at all, but nope, she's as easy to take to the cleaners as she ever was." Oak pops the noodles in her mouth. "Mmm so goooood Hemlock, yummy yum!" Hemlock simply flips her off. "Haha, whatever. So we're rehearsing the play



tomorrow right? What does everyone wanna do the day after?"

Lily flops backwards onto the mattress and spreads out as much as she can. "Man, I kinda just want to chill out in the van and veg after putting up the posters. We've been running around non-stop since Coy joined us. Not that it hasn't been fun, Coy, but sometimes you just gotta relax."

Sequoia joins Lily on the mattress. "I'm good with that honestly. I haven't read any of the books in here yet, and I haven't even scratched the surface of the movies you all have."

Lily lazily lifts her arm and then lets it flop down. "We all have. No one owns anything here, it's free for all, like our shows. Even our clothes are up for grabs. Not that anyone can actually fit into each other's clothes except you and Oak. Sorry, we're gross."

Sequoia smiles up at the ceiling. "Like you said, *we're* gross. So tomorrow's the Marksman, right? I haven't even read the script yet. I'm playing uhm Samuel, right? What's this one about?"

Lily turns and props herself up on her elbow, facing Sequoia. "Samiel, not Samuel. Samiel's a demon who attempts to take the soul of the hunter Caspar, played by Hemlock, who bargains for more time by roping another hunter, Maxine, played by Oak, into bargaining her soul in

exchange for seven magic bullets that'll hit any target you want. I play the love interest, Agathe, who Maxine is trying to woo by winning a hunting competition."

Sequoia turns her head, her nose close to Lily's. "Haha, no wonder you said this role's perfect for me."

Oak gets up to flip over the record. "This one's my favorite of all the plays we do. It's so classic."

Hemlock leans against the wall and puts her hands behind her head. "We all have our favorites. Mine's the Capsaicin plays, particularly The Red Octopus. I play the pirate Capsaicin in his many adventures on the high seas. We adapted them from books on the shelf if you wanna read them, but it's way more fun to act them out. Since there's so many stories and variations, it's one of our biggest hits. Captain Capsaicin always hits his mark."

Sequoia sits up, her shoulders slouched forward. "Do you always play men and villains?"

Hemlock folds her arms. "Hey now, Capsaicin is no villain. He's a free spirit, and only steals from armed vessels. But yeah, I usually play men but only cuz all plays have a male lead of some sort. Saves Oak from having to do it. Plus the babes go nuts for it." Lily throws some balled up socks at Hemlock.

"What if a play only calls for women?"

Lily sits up and shakes her head. "No such play exists."

Oak comes back over and spreads her arms as she flops face down on the mattress, tackling Sequoia and Lily down to the bed. “What Lily means to say is that we’ll play that one as written. It’s only when I’m the lead role and the play calls for a male lead. In *The Marksman*, the lead role is Max, not Maxine, but because I only play women we adapt it for me.”

“What about you, Lil?”

Lily rolls atop Sequoia, looks down at her, and shrugs. “Eh, whatever. It doesn’t matter to me one way or the other. My height kinda means it’s nearly always women, tho. It’s hard to find men’s clothing in my size, nevermind costumes! But I’ve got a couple we’ve made on our own. How about you, do you have any preferences you wanna air? Promise we’ll honor them without hesitation.”

Sequoia shrugs back. “I think I’m more of your mindset than anything else. Whatever’s called for I’ll play.”

“You sure? You don’t have to, it’s perfectly alright to say you have a preference.”

Sequoia nods. “Yeah, I’m sure. If anything, it’ll help glorify my creator.” Her eyes see past Lily, despite looking right in her eyes. “Ah... Mahog... How your unsettling eye glistens in the moonlight...”

Lily laughs and rolls off her and onto Oak. “Haha, I should’ve guessed.”

Sequoia turns her head to the other two. “How about the show after tomorrow we put on my play?”

Lily buries her face in Oak’s neck. “Three days from now is so faaaaar. Let’s think about that later. We don’t want to get in the habit of actually running a schedule. Schedules are for responsible, busy people, not losers like us. Besides, we’ve yet to even write that play, let alone rehearse it.”

“I guess you have a point.” A deep bass plays under a discordant piano, snares splashing the spine of the song into place. Everyone just takes in the music for a long while. Sequoia sits up and faces Hemlock, the other two a little busy. “Hey, are there any ruins around here? Besides the catacombs I mean.”

“Nope. They’ve all been disarmed and torn down. The only one still standing has been repurposed as a lighthouse.”

“Torn down? But... Why would anyone do that? Those ruins are part of the history of the world!”

Hemlock shrugs and shakes her head. “That’s progress for ya. More roads to put in, more houses to build, more factories needed... Once everything historical has been documented and collected, people figure, why keep them around? They don’t hold up to modern building safety standards so most can’t be repurposed. People are

pretty flippant about those sorta things. About the only ruins left are out in rural areas in Kartoffel.”

Sequoia hangs her head. “That’s so sad... I guess I get it tho, it’s not like they’re part of their history, only ours and we’re all long gone.”

Hemlock squeezes her shoulder. “Sorry girly. Not everything up here is beautiful and wonderful.” She gets up and picks her coat off the bed, slipping it on. “Speaking of, I’m heading out. I promised Tabby I’d pick her up after work and... hang out.” Lily picks up another pair of socks and tosses them at Hemlock. She lets them hit her and just laughs. “You know you love me. Caio gals.” and she leaves the van.

The other three are quiet, letting the music speak for them. After a short time, the music intensifies, crashing into itself, the instruments vying for dominance. The murky bass shifts tones, becoming more prominent and sharp, as the jangly piano hammers it back down. Sequoia’s head picks up with the rhythm, and she glances back at the other two. “How about we go to the lighthouse one day? Just to see what it’s like.”

Lily pops up and pulls Sequoia down onto the mattress with her and Oak, wrapping around both of them. She speaks softly, just audible over the music, and brushes Sequoia’s hair away from her eyes, their faces close to one another’s. “Sure, we can do that. We can

make a kite and take some flying discs to the beach out on the cape, make a day of it.” She pecks Sequoia on the lips. “But for now... let’s just drift and go with the river’s flow.”

Oak purrs, her tail finding Sequoia’s and they curl around each other. Oak throws her arm over Lily and Sequoia, and pulls them close. Sequoia wraps her arms and legs as much around Lily and Oak as she can. “Yeah, let’s just go with the flow.”

There’s no need to chronicle every moment in a person’s life. Or even every day. Think about your own life, and how many stories you can pull out of an average week. The next month slips away from us. The gals put on shows and concerts. Some days off, they busk. Others they go to the beach and hang out. Sometimes they go to the Boar, but mostly they cook at home. They watch movies, read books, talk, listen to music, play music with each other, dance with each other... They live life as they see fit, carefree and wild, caring for nothing but each other and the world around them.

Sequoia takes over cooking responsibilities from Lily. Another thing she has a knack for. She washes the dishes properly these days. She makes coffee from beans, takes showers, goes to the laundromat with the others, lifts things with her hands when she needs to. It’s not even that she restrains herself to the shows, it’s that there’s no need to restrain herself at all. She lives naturally, like any

other person in the world. Sunflower doesn't show her face around them the entire time. The guild wall gets painted over, and nothing comes of it. The truce holds, not that the gals take that as a signal to do whatever they want. They behave. Mostly.

And not once do they answer the Loser Board.

## Chapter 14

Sequoia fiddles with the metal sunflower in her lapel and looks out over the bandstand's lawn. Another packed show. There's quite a bit more families than usual in this particular crowd, but that's to be expected. Kids love to watch clowns. The outcasts and misfits are on the lawn, on their blankets and folding chairs, all in their own niches. They're here less for the show and more to be with each other around others. Sequoia's familiar with the sentiment. She smiles out at the crowd she's come to know and love, and folds her hands on the table's top. People greet her, having grown familiar with and accustomed to her. She talks with the folks on Knoll and Tabby, she talks with anyone, really.

A few people ask what tricks she's got up her sleeves for this show, but they already know there's no answer forthcoming. You'll just have to see for yourself. The lucky

raffle winner brings a hunk of wood, some bits of metal, and some yarn, showing them to Sequoia, asking her what she's gonna do. Sorry, gotta wait til after the show. Today's the last show in Feymist before they begin the two week trek up to Yama. Not their last night in town, that comes tomorrow. Next stop is Plankspire, a three day showing. Sequoia looks up at the stars, then back down at the donation box. She knows that's all they're going to get for now. She picks it up and turns to head backstage, when she hears a twig snap sharply, pointedly behind her. She turns around and smiles wide, setting the donation box back down on the table. "...I was wondering if you were gonna come say hi, Sunflower."

Sunflower approaches the table, stopping just in front of it. Her face blank, her hands in her pockets. No sword tonight. "Good evening, Sequoia. Nice night out, isn't it? It's finally starting to warm up a little."

Sequoia walks around the table so she's face to face with Sunflower. "Yeah, altho under those lights and those costumes that isn't necessarily a good thing! I'm really happy you came before we left."

"Where will you go after this?"

"Yama. We're doing some shows in a few towns along the way, but that's our next month-long tour."

"I see."



Sequoia tilts her head, smiling genuinely at Sunflower. “Still following me to make sure I behave?”

Sunflower shakes her head and casts her eyes down. “No, I stopped doing that long ago. Listen Sequoia, I... I’ve thought a lot about what you said last month. Do you have a minute to talk?”

“Always for you. What’s up?”

Sunflower averts her eyes from Sequoia’s gazing into hers. “I wanted to give you a little perspective into my actions that day and... and warn you.” She meets Sequoia’s gaze at last. “About the dean of Feymist University, Bergen. Dean Bergen of Feymist University requested me specifically to investigate the ‘disruption of a sanctioned summoning experiment’ in the catacombs that first day we met. I was told to verify that the summoned creature was ‘banished’ and if not to... bring it back to a lab in the university, living or dead. I investigated the ruins and found... a spot that looked like someone was squatting. Lots of books from their library and food wrappers and dirty utensils. I suspect that was you. I also found a spot not very deep into the ruins with blood splatters on the wall. I reported to the dean that whatever was summoned seemed to have been killed by the Freelancer the previous night, but there was no body to collect, and they sent in a sanitation and recovery crew and informed the guild that the job was complete. Not long after, we got the call to take down that sea serpent and I was dispatched to

eliminate it. Back to back jobs, both absolutely horrible ones. And you were right, it's not like I enjoyed killing it, but it had to be done. Even if you don't believe that, even if I don't believe that, it's what the guild ordered me to do. Then... Hemlock's taunts and seeing you right after, an already bad day became worse as I realized that Hemlock had deceived both the university and myself and I reacted harshly. I'm sorry, Sequoia. It was... uncharacteristic of me. I also wanted to tell you that the guild has ordered me to continue investigating the dean and... this summoning experiment. I haven't told anyone, not the guild, the university, or the Knights of Cecilia about a demon being up here unbound. I felt like you deserved to know the truth of why you're here, what transpired that day, and my mission. And I wanted to apologize for how I've acted towards you. Again, and more sincerely."

Sequoia scoffs and gives a mirthless, gasp of a laugh. "Is that a joke? I can't believe you fell for such a stupid story as that. This dean Bergen sounds like a real shitheel, and worse, he has terrible stories. Did he even show you proof of this so-called experiment? Any paperwork, any seal from the government? Anything by those Knights of Cecilia?" Sunflower averts her gaze and says nothing. "No, I thought not, because it doesn't exist. For someone so smart you sure don't listen very well. I already told you why I'm up here. Cecilia's still watching, you know. I can't prove it, but I believe it. I think she's giving me a chance. Thousands upon thousands of years is a long time for

anything, let alone hurt feelings. What point is there in summoning me unbound and solid? Why would a person want an uncontrolled demon permanently up here? If that was the case why didn't Cecilia just stuff me back down to Hell? Bergen can't even close the loopholes of his own dumb story. All of that is just a coincidence, everything's a coincidence really." Sequoia's silent for a few moments, her head drooping. "Is... is that why you really wanted to talk to me? To interview the demon for the guild so you can further your mission?"

Sunflower... flinches. She grimaces, and rubs the back of her neck. "No, Sequoia, not at all. I'm sorry if it came across like that. I'm here tonight as your friend, not as a Crossguard. Nothing we say goes beyond here."

Sequoia's visibly taken aback, her eyes wide. "You... you want to be friends?"

Sunflower *smiles*. It's small, but it's there. "I do. There's something else you should know."

Sequoia leans in, still in shock. "Oh?"

"What you did to the guild wall when you fixed those bricks..." and Sunflower grins broadly. "Was really funny! I couldn't stop myself from laughing even as I painted over it."

Sequoia slaps her forehead and bends her head back. "I got you to laugh, and I missed it?! How shameful!"

Sequoia tilts her head at Sunflower, beaming at her. "As a friend, lemme ask you, Sunflower: Do you enjoy being in the Crossguards?"

The smile disappears from Sunflower's face and she looks distant, sad, her emotions taking her sword's place of prominence. "It's not that I enjoy it so much as I have to be."

"Why?"

"You know why. You said as much yourself."

Sequoia's smile turns to annoyance and she huffs. "You can't really still believe you need to shoulder responsibility for the world, Sunflower. After I poured out my heart, you still think that?"

Sunflower shakes her head. "I *know* it, Sequoia. I know you don't believe me when I say that, but it's the truth. You... haven't seen when I've seen. Know what I know."

Sequoia stamps her feet. "Then tell me! What, you think I can't handle it? I'm naive Sunflower, not weak." She grins, winking and sticking out her tongue. "I've literally been through Hell."

Sunflower stares at her for a second, then her shoulders heave with laughter, unrestrained, pure, free. "Pfft haha did you really just say that? I can't believe you, you really are the worst!"

Sequoia closes her eyes and smiles warmly. “There. There’s that laugh I’ve been waiting for. It’s even better than I imagined. You should do it more, it suits you.” Sunflower’s face grows red. “So c’mon, Sunflower. You don’t have to carry this burden alone. Share it with me, we can handle it together.”

Sunflower wasn’t prepared for this onslaught. “I-It’s not that, it’s that I literally can’t tell you. So much of what I did and what I do is classified at the Coalition level.”

“So? I won’t tell anyone, not even the gals.”

“It’s not as simple as that, Sequoia.”

Sequoia huffs in annoyance again. Every conversation with Sunflower is a rollercoaster for Sequoia. “Yes it is! Seriously, who cares. It’s not as if anyone’s listening that’ll know. Who cares about stupid stuff like ‘state secrets’ and whatever, this is just us two talking. I thought you trusted me?”

Sunflower finally finds familiar ground, an argument. She restrains herself, but she does speak seriously. “If I didn’t trust you, I wouldn’t be here. I swore an oath, Sequoia. Please don’t trample on its importance to me.”

Sequoia’s lost this duel already. She hangs her head and rubs her arm. “I’m sorry, Sunflower. I didn’t mean to offend you like that. I just don’t get it, y’know? I know we’re of two really different worlds, in more ways than just

Hell and Earth, and I just sometimes don't realize how different. I know duty is important to you, and I know you know how I feel about junk like that. I'll try my best to not insult your sense of duty again."

Sunflower rubs the back of her neck. Her other hand lifts up for a second, but she forces it down. "It's not that big of a deal, but I appreciate you respecting my choices. You do have a point tho, the guild is often... Unreasonable. Especially to me. Being their ace isn't easy, I'll have you know."

An opening. Sequoia smiles, dragging this rollercoaster up a hill. "Just know that it's never too late, Sunflower. You can always just... do whatever you want in life. You could even just..." Sequoia debates finishing the sentence. Her heart wins out over her brain. "Quit and come with us, altho it may take some convincing on the others' parts."

Sunflower smiles back, finding equilibrium. "I appreciate the sentiment, but I think I'll pass."

Sequoia picks up the donation box. "Gonna stick around for the show? We're doing our clown shtick, always a gas."

Sunflower's smile widens. "I wouldn't miss it for the world."

The soft thuds of sneakers jogging across the lawn comes towards them. Oak waves at Sequoia and raises her voice. "Hey Coy! It's just about time to get into mak-" Oak skids to a halt near Sequoia, and eases behind her slightly, having noticed her company. "Oh. Uhm. H-hi, S-Sunflower."

Sunflower manages a small smile for her. "Good evening... Oak, right?"

Oak nods nervously. "Yes ma'am."

Sunflower sighs, and shakes her head, hanging it. Mentally, she chastises herself. She lifts her head, altho still needs to look down at Oak. "You don't have to call me ma'am, and you don't have to be so nervous around me anymore." She rubs the back of her neck. "Look... I'm sorry for all the insults I've hurled at you over the years. I don't know what it is that made me so... so angry. Can we just... start over?"

Oak stifles a yelp. Her ears perk up and her tail swishes furiously. "For real?! I uh... I don't know what to say, but..." She manages a weak smile. "Sure, I'd like that. Hey, uhm... You should... I dunno..." Oak reaches back and grabs her tail, bringing it forward and trying to keep it still. "H-hang out after the show? I'm... I'm s-sure the others would like to hear some of your stories. If you have time."

Sunflower nods. "I'll... consider it."

Oak lets out all her breath and smiles a little brighter. “Phew, I’ll take it. C’mon Coy, we better hurry if we’re gonna make curtain.”

Sequoia pecks Oak’s cheek. “Sure, be right there. Promise I won’t keep our audience waiting.”

“Well, since you promised. See you soon.” Oak jogs back to the bandstand and heads backstage.

Sunflower shakes her head and her expression goes blank again. “I didn’t have the nerve to tell her I’m too shy for that.”

Sequoia grins a lopsided grin. “Don’t worry, we’ll wear you down eventually. If we see each other again. We both travel a lot, so who knows? Maybe our paths will cross again.”

Sunflower smiles back. “Count on it. Hey, Sequoia?”

“You can just call me Coy, y’know. All my friends do.”

Sunflower grows... nervous? “I... I’m not into the whole nickname thing. Maybe someday. I was gonna say... ..”

Sequoia tilts her head. “Yes?”

Sunflower shakes her head. “(I just can’t.) ...That I’m looking forward to the show. Have fun up there.”



Sequoia tucks the donation box under her arm and smiles at Sunflower. "You know it. See you out there!" She runs for the bandstand, waving behind her.

Sunflower's head droops, and she stands there at the table for a long few minutes before taking a seat in the back row. After the show, she's nowhere to be seen.

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"Alright gals. Moment of truth." Lily undoes the lock to the donation box, and flips it upside down over the mattress. A handful of bills and a few handfuls of coins fall freely out of it. Not as much as they've become accustomed to this tour, but it is the end of it. They're beginning to become a fixture. Time to move on. Still, it's more than they've been experiencing since before this tour. Lily's appreciative. "Woo! Alright! We'll have plenty for resupplies and fuel!"

Oak grins broadly and pokes through the bills and change. "And we can make a more sizable donation than usual this time, too. We have enough for emergencies on the road, right?"

Lily nods. "Don't worry about that. We've got plenty in the kitty. Even on the off chance that the van breaks down, we should be able to repair it no problem."

Oak picks up a note, sees it's for Hemlock, and hands it to her. "So tomorrow we stop by Knoll Ave and say

goodbye to the gang, go to the fabric store, the art supply store, the fuel depot, and hit up the Boar for dinner. Who should we give the remainder of the cash to?”

Sequoia rubs the back of her neck. “Uhm, is there an organization that feeds and houses the homeless? I’d like to nominate that, if possible. Being in those catacombs for that week, I can really empathize.”

Oak nods and smiles at Sequoia. “Yeah, we know a few food security and mutual aid programs to give to. Good call, Coy. Anywhere else we should go before leaving?”

Lily and Sequoia respond in one voice. “The beach!”

Oak laughs. “I should’ve known. I want to go there too.” She puts her finger to her chin and glances up at the ceiling. “I still feel like we’re forgetting something...”

Hemlock tosses the note aside. Tempting, but no thanks. “The post office, dummy.”

Realization dawns on Oak, with a tinge of anxiety. “Oh right, I need to check the PO box. Been putting that off the whole visit. Hopefully it’ll be pretty empty. Going out, Hemlock?”

Hemlock shakes her head and tosses her coat on a pile of clothes. “Nah. We have a day of it tomorrow and I’m pretty bushed. The clown act doesn’t bring in the honeys anyways. Let’s pile on the couch and put on a movie.”

Oak smiles. “Only if you’re on the bottom. We should watch that goofy vampire movie where everyone uses fake accents. Perfect cap to a night of clowning.”

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The thing Sequoia’s going to miss the most about Feymist is the moonlight splayed out on the sea. The churning water in the dark with that bright streak laid across it... It always reminds her of that magical first night. The beach holds so many wonderful memories even after just one month. Her heart yearns to stay, but it’s overpowered by her excitement to see more of the continent. The conflicting emotions are too much to deal with, so she shoves her hands in her pockets and slouches as they walk the boards. She looks up at Hemlock, playfully butting her horns against her arm. “You know, we didn’t *need* to spend that money on the art supplies. I could just rewrite the reality of the canvas’ color, like I did the guild wall.”

Hemlock drops her hand heavily on Sequoia’s head. “You should learn to do things without magic, Coy. Toil and labor feels good, builds character.”

Sequoia rolls her eyes. “Yeah ok, *dad*. Next you’ll tell me how fun it is to paint a fence.”

Hemlock crosses her arms. “I’m serious. I’ll teach you how to build backdrops and Oak will teach you how to

paint 'em. The satisfaction of a job well done is unbeatable.”

Sequoia shrugs. “I’m not opposed to it, just seems like we can get better results faster and with less energy. Then we can do other stuff with our time.”

“It ain’t important that the backdrops look good, Coy, it’s only important that they’re functional. You get too realistic and it doesn’t connect with people. It becomes as impressive as looking at something in real life. The purpose of looking at art is to appreciate the skill and effort that went into it and examine the emotions it induces. Art without heart is inherently meaningless.”

“I guess that makes sense. Sure, sounds like it could be fun.” A few moments pass, the sound of Oak shuffling mail just barely audible over the crashing waves. Sequoia leans back, her hands behind her head. “It sucks that we couldn’t get the gang on Knoll to come to the Boar with us tonight. It feels weird leaving our goodbyes in their shops.”

Lily shrugs. “Del and Turk never come to the Boar. It’s not their kinda scene, understandably so. They’re kinda homebodies anyways. Such is the life of a married couple. Apri will come out with us sometimes, but she’s usually working late to accommodate patients who work during the day. Speaking of, I kinda find myself surprised that your blood is just ordinary AB-.”

“Haha she sounded soooo disappointed when she said it was just mundane without any special properties. Can’t say I was looking forward to being ‘harvested’ for her apothecary practice. ...” Sequoia stares out at the moon hanging over the ocean and sees some dolphins jump in the moonlight. Her heart aches. “So this is it, huh. Our last night in Feymist.”

Lily blows into her hands and rubs them. It’s getting warmer, but the wind coming off the ocean bites into you. “Only for now. We’ll be back in the fall.”

“Didn’t you say the busy season is in the summer? Why don’t we come back then?”

Hemlock scoffs and kicks at a loose nail on the boards. “Cuz we ain’t good enough for the Chamber of Commerce.”

The sound of an envelope being opened and paper unfolding goes unnoticed by the other three. Lily sighs and shakes her head sadly. “That’s part of it. The local government doesn’t think our act will go over well with the tourist crowd. Besides, if we ever did a summer show, they would force us to sell tickets, and we refuse to budge on our shows being free-for-all. As they should be. All that tourist money flows through the local economy at lightning speeds, whereas we don’t bring in much money, and what money we do make gets spent very selectively. It’d be nice to do a summer tour, if only once, but that’d be

playing mostly to tourists. Our act should be for the locals of Feymist, something special just for them. The locals take a backseat to tourism during the summer and a lot of them resent that. Let the tourists get fleeced, we'll always be genuine and true."

Sequoia smiles. "I dig that philosophy. Still, someday I'd like to see what Feymist is like when everything's open." She looks out over the ocean again. "And when the water's warm."

"You'll get to see that when we come in fall. They do a festival in October as a final hurrah for the season. We'll be sure to stop by a beach sometime in the summer. Nuss has some good beaches and we're usually there during that season."

Sequoia swings her tail around to bat at Oak's swishing tail. "You're being awfully quiet, Oak. Didja get any interesting mail?" Surprisingly, she's met with silence. Oak merely stares wide-eyed at the paper gripped tightly in her hands. "Oak? Hellooooo~" Sequoia's ears pick up some footsteps coming across the boards towards them. A man in a weird yellow jumpsuit strides across the boards. The plasticky looking bright yellow suit's pant legs are stuffed into heavy boots, the arm sleeves tucked into thick gloves. A variety of gizmos and dials are attached to the suit, with a sword hanging off his hip. His attention is similarly distracted, staring down at a strange looking device gripped in his hands. Lily and Hemlock freeze in

their tracks, but Oak keeps walking, staring at the sheet of paper. Sequoia stops and cups her hands over her mouth. “Yo Oak! Heads up!”

“Huh?” Oak’s head pops up just in time to see herself collide with the man, knocking her and the man flat on their bottoms and sending mail flying. “Oof!”

Lily grows as pale as the moon. “Oh shit.”

Hemlock grabs Sequoia’s shoulder and pulls her hard. She grits her teeth and lowers her voice. “Get behind me right now Coy.” Without a word, Sequoia follows the flow and gets behind Hemlock, staying close.

The man rubs his head and starts gathering the mail. “Ugh! Sorry about that miss. Lemme help you.”

Oak gets on her hands and knees, collecting the mail. “No no, it’s ok, I should’ve-” She lifts her head up, finally noticing the man she collided with. “Oh shit.”

The man shakes his head and hands Oak a pile of mail, who numbly takes it. “No no, it’s my fault. I was too busy looking down at my instruments, not watching where I’m... going?” He looks at the instrument closer and points it at Oak. He tilts his head. “You’re reading yellow. We’ve... visited you right?”

Oak stands up straight, her head nodding vigorously. “Yessir. Five years ago. We haven’t done anything since, honest. I can even show you my ID if you want, sir.”

The man chuckles to himself. "I believe you. It's rare we visit someone and they don't learn their lesson." His head picks up and he smiles at Oak. "Say, this may be fate! You wouldn't happen to know of anyone... practicing around here, would you?"

Oak shakes her head quickly. "No sir, I don't talk with the community here. Everything I do is just for our shows, totally above board and approved, no playing with reality like it was a ball of string."

The weirdo in the yellow suit looks the three gals over, his hand on his chin. "I see. Would you happen to be plugged into the Freelancer community, by any chance? I've interviewed the other locals but... no one seems to know anything about Freelancing. I suspect the guilds here get a lot of work."

Oak's tail betrays her, twitching wildly. "Uh."

Hemlock wraps her arms around Lily and Oak's shoulders, and she starts to move forward. "We don't know anything about that either, friend. Now, if you'll excuse us."

The man glides with surprising quickness back in front of them, looking at them more critically. "Oh? You all seem a bit... seasoned. Are you sure you don't know any Freelancers? Specifically a tall woman..." Realization starts to dawn on him. "With a... blue long coat? ... Wasn't there another person with you three?"



Hemlock's grip on the other two's shoulders grows tighter. "(Shit!) Uh."

A familiar voice calls out from down the street. "Brot! Hey Brot!" Sunflower strides quickly in from off the street and onto the boards, waving her arm. "Brot, how are you, old buddy!"

The man's head whips around and he recoils in surprise. "Sunflower?!"

Sunflower walks until she's in front of Brot, blocking his view of the gals. She folds her arms and tilts her head, grinning. "Is that any way to greet an old comrade? How's it going, Goddess but it's been a long time."

"Comrade?" Brot shakes his head. "Sunflower, it's been four years since I've been a Crossguard, and last I checked you weren't exactly on friendly terms with the Knights."

"Hey now, that doesn't mean I can't take the time to catch up with an old friend! How's time been treating you?"

Brot leans around Sunflower to peer at the gals. "Actually, I was in the middle of-"

Sunflower bends to block his view. Her eyes dart up and down over Brot. "What's this? You're leaning on your left leg? Hey, take a few steps in the other direction for me, I wanna be sure of my hypothesis."

Brot slumps over and hangs his head, shaking it. “You never change, do you? If I do, will you let me get back to my investigation?” Sunflower nods, and Brot complies, his leg limping slightly behind him as he walks.

Sunflower turns her head over her shoulder and frowns, hissing just above a whisper. “(What are you waiting for?! Get outta here while you can!)” The gals don’t need to be told twice. The other three surround Sequoia as best they can, and walk swiftly to the street off the boards. Once there, they dash up the street, ducking down an alley to cross over onto Feymist Ave. More people there. In the distance, they can hear Sunflower say “Ah hah, just as I thought, you injured your leg, didn’t you. Or is time catching up with you?”

The gals don’t stop running when they hit Feymist Ave. They keep running, Hemlock pulling Sequoia along, wordlessly working their way through the narrow side streets and alleys leading to the Boar, where they know there’ll be lots of people. They aren’t disappointed when they come crashing through the door, making the host jump as the door bangs against the station. They crowd the doorway, trying to catch their breath, when a pair of gals shoulder their way past them and head to the bar. That’s enough to snap them out of it. They find a table, not their usual one as that one’s occupied, but a round one with six seats, and sit down at it, still panting. Oak puts a

hand to her heart and gasps for air. “Holy shit that was close! I don’t think I’ve run so far in my whole life!”

Lily flops on the table, her breath already even and measured. Definitely the most in shape of all of them. “I... I can’t believe Sunflower bailed us out like that! Forget every nasty thing I ever said about that self-righteous ass.”

Sequoia heaves for air, bending over. Definitely the least in shape of all of them. “Huff... What... What just happened?!”

Hemlock shakes her head, gripping the edge of the table. “Sunflower probably just saved your life is what just happened. That was a Knight!”

“That nerd with the gizmo and the weird suit? Now that I think about it, it was weird he had a sword...”

Hemlock crosses her arms in front of her, trying to regain her composure. It doesn’t work. “That’s the same outfit the ones that came for us were wearing. Fuck man, I think my heart is just permanently going to beat this fast from now on.”

Tabby saunters over to the table, notepad and pen in her hand. “Hey ever-” Her eyes go wide when she sees the state the gals are in. “What happened to you four?”

Oak’s breath finally catches up with her, and she smooths down her hair. “Long story, Tabby. Can I get a beer tonight?”

Tabby's eyes grow even wider. "You? Drinking? You all *must* have had a scare. Sure thing babe. Beers all around? Uhm, 'cept you, Coy. Sorry. Coffee tho?" Sequoia nods. "'K. I'll be right back. Don't go having heart attacks on my shift, now." And she heads off to the bar.

Oak hangs her head. "Maybe we can just live in the Boar from now on. We had a good run..."

Lily pulls Sequoia and Oak close to her and hugs them tight. "We're for sure gonna stay here for at least an hour or two." She looks up at Hemlock, sitting across the table from them. "Hemlock, why are they looking for you?"

Hemlock raises her hands in defense and leans back. "Search me! You know I ain't done nothing! If anything I figured they were looking for Coy!"

Sequoia slaps her forehead. "Oh duh! If he's asking around for Freelancers then he's already been to the University!"

Hemlock shakes her head. "I thought we were so careful too..."

Lily turns to Sequoia. "Except for changing reality left and right."

"Not so much anymore! Like... basically just for our shows! I don't even so much as wash dishes that way anymore! So I changed the guild's wall a few times and tripped a few people. Will they seriously kill me over that?"

Oak's breath finally gets even and measured. "It's not what you're doing, Coy, it's who you are. I don't think a KnoC is going to ask for your ID."

"How would they know I'm a demon, anyways? We haven't been around in forever and even you said that no one really summons us anymore. Even then, I don't look much like we do when we get summoned. We usually make ourselves look much more sinister and vague and have like, wings and gnarlier horns and bigger fangs and a forked tongue and shit. My ID should be enough to deter them."

Tabby drops off drinks for everyone and moves on to the next table. Hemlock takes a long pull, draining it in one continuous gulp. "Sunflower sure realized what you were right off the bat. No way the KnoCs will miss that." The door to the tavern swings open, and Sunflower steps in, her eyes scanning the room. They fall on the gals and she starts to walk over. "Speak of the devil."

Oak watches Sunflower approach with wide eyes. "No way."

Sunflower stops at the table, and rests her hands on an empty chair. "I thought the four of you might run here. May I sit with you?"

This is shocking enough to snap the gals out of the incident that just passed. The panic leaves them, replaced

with surprise. Well, except for Sequoia, who remains unphased. “Sure, of course.”

Sunflower starts to drag the chair back when Lily leans forward and folds her hands over the table. “Well...” Sunflower pauses. Lily, Oak, and Hemlock all nod at each other. Lily leans back, her hands behind her head, and grins up at Sunflower. After all these years, she finally has Sunflower right where she wants her. She savors the moment. “Well you see, it’s not like we have a problem with it. We’re forgive and forget types, we don’t hold grudges. But there’s a price to sitting at our table.”

Sunflower puts a hand on her hip. “You must be joking.”

Lily waggles her finger at Sunflower. “Not money. The first time anyone sits with us, they gotta tell us a story. Doesn’t have to be at the table, it can be later by a fire or something.” Lily shrugs. “Sorry, it’s just how we roll, we’re weird. Promise we won’t turn whatever your story is into a show or anything.”

Sunflower hesitates for a moment, then scoots the chair back so she can sit in it. She pulls herself up to the table. “Those are terms I can live with.”

Sequoia looks at Sunflower and smiles. “Thanks for saving us, Sunflower, but I thought you said you stopped following me around.”

Sunflower crosses her arms, closes her eyes, and grins. “No, I only said I wasn’t making sure you behaved anymore. By the way, your Capsaicin plays are by far your best.”

Sequoia bends her head backwards in laughter. “Pffft haha. This is a fun game. Too bad you’re about to spoil it by saying I need to cut out the magic.”

Sunflower lowers her arms, folding her hands on the table. She shakes her head. “This is serious, Sequoia. They sent a Knight after you. I managed to convince him that I already questioned Hemlock and that the four of you were utterly incapable of anything bordering competence, let alone Freelancing and being able to hide minor reality changes, but all he needs to do is see Sequoia before that vanishes. If you stop now, he’ll never know you left town and won’t have any way to follow you.”

“I get what you’re saying but... this is how I deal with the world. It’s not just that it’s now a big part of our shows...” Sequoia shakes her hand in the so-so sign. “Well ok it’s a lot that, that bit I do where I make something from random junk someone brings in really wows ‘em, but it’s part of who I am. I am a demon. I can’t disentangle myself from that as much as you can’t disentangle yourself from what you did in Rainsoaked. It’s part of my nature.”

“I’m not always going to be able to save you, Sequoia. Just know it’s not just you that’ll have to live with the consequences from that. It’s these three too. *When* they catch you, do you think they’ll leave it at just you?”

Lily folds her arms in front of her and frowns. “It’s not like we haven’t thought of that ourselves, y’know. We accepted those risks last month when we took her in.”

Oak finds her bravery and speaks up. “I mean... we’re actors and musicians, we perform for a buncha people up on a stage and plaster our posters all over town. We figured we’d come across a KnoC eventually and they’d be able to tell what Coy is just as easily as you did. We ah... just haven’t figured out what to do about it.”

Sequoia slaps her fist in her hand and grins. “Easy, we prank ‘em, and prank ‘em hard. Make what I did to Sunflower look as harmless as washing the dishes.”

Sunflower shakes her head. “It’s not that easy. Even if you can somehow bypass their isolation suits-”

“Their what?”

“That suit Brot was wearing. That’s called an isolation suit. It helps isolate him from changes to reality. It’s like trying to make something stick to a non-stick pan, it just slips off, can’t find purchase. It’s standard issue for any Knight out in the field, otherwise they wouldn’t have a prayer against an adept ritualist.”



Sequoia wilts slightly. “So no turning their sword into a rubber chicken or making them smell like a nightmare?”

Sunflower shakes her head. “I’m afraid not. Even if you could somehow do any of that, that just means they’ll send more and more Knights after you, because you’re a bigger threat. Altho that does bring up a good question, what have you been doing to the point they sent Brot of all Knights?”

Sequoia sighs. “Just the stuff for our shows, basically. Maybe some pranking here and there, turning some sand into glass art occasionally, but like... barely anything. Altho...” and Sequoia greets her friend, the ceiling. “I do a *ton* of reality changing for our shows. Is this Brot guy super good or something?”

“He was a B class Crossguard. B class is a really advanced rank, reserved for powerful warriors who can complete their objectives with minimal problems. Altho he seems to have injured his leg, that doesn’t make him less dangerous. Just easier to run from.”

“Why are you on bad terms with them, anyway? Were you one of them or something?”

“No, nothing like that. There’s a lot of crossover between Knights and Crossguards, and we bump into each other a lot. The Knights of Cecilia weren’t formed because of what that maniac in Rainsoaked was doing, it’s because of what I did to fix everything. Apparently, their

mission isn't to fix reality, it's to punish unreality and disturbances in reality as a deterrent, make people think twice before doing anything to change reality. Kinda similar to how law enforcement works. I may have been the impetus for their forming, but what I did is the *most* someone could change reality. They don't cotton to that, especially since no one knows what the backlash of fixing everything was. I left all that behind in Rainsoaked, but that doesn't mean I've forgotten how to do any of it. I think that potential for what I could do makes them paranoid of me. For those reasons, we aren't exactly on best terms."

Tabby comes back over, another beer for Hemlock in hand. "You gals calmed... down?" She notices Sunflower. "Oh my. Tonight's full of surprises." She eyes the other gals. "You four... ok with this? Or should I get Harvey?"

Hemlock shakes her head. "Nah, it's cool. We're just working some stuff out."

"If you say so... Ready to order?" Everyone gives their food order and Tabby heads off to fill it.

Sunflower watches her walk off. "She seems pretty defensive of the four of you."

Hemlock waves an arm and lets it drop back into her other, folded arm. "Yeah, she's pretty great. Can't blame her for being worried that we're sitting with a Crossguard."

Oak takes a swig of her beer and makes a face. “Wugh. I always forget what this crap tastes like.” She turns to Sunflower. “So all that in Rainsoaked really happened, just the way the papers said?”

“Not exactly like the papers said, but largely yes.”

Hemlock grins smugly. “Toldja so.”

Lily rolls her eyes. “Yeah yeah.” She crosses her arms over the table and leans in, facing Sunflower. “So how come they haven’t come after you over it? Seems like you’re way more of a threat than Coy.”

Sunflower rubs the back of her neck. “Because what I did was sanctioned by the governments of Rainsoaked and I haven’t performed a ritual since. Being an S class Crossguard helps too. You have to understand, Sequoia is one of the more impossible things that could be on this Earth. To them, she’s a stable ball of unreality that can spread further unreality at will with minimal consequences. It’s the potential of what she is that frightens them, not what she is actually doing. Being Cecilia’s hated enemy certainly doesn’t help.”

Oak powers through the bitterness as she speaks into the mug. If Oak was in a joking mood, she’d call herself a copycat. “So they *are* a religious order. Isn’t that kinda weird they dedicate themselves to punishing messing with reality when that’s exactly what Cecilia did?”

“Exactly their point. That’s the domain of Cecilia, not mortals. She created everything, it’s Her right to mold it as She sees fit. It’s an affront to the Goddess to interact with the fabric of reality. It’s why She banished the demons, after all.”

Sequoia tosses her hands in the air, becoming uncharacteristically agitated. “Then it doesn’t matter whether or not I change reality, they’ll come for me just based on my appearance. I can’t hide that, and I certainly am not going to stop putting on shows or living my life because a bunch of jerks see me as a threat. I did the whole hiding thing for a week. Not a fan.”

Sunflower stares right into Sequoia’s eyes, a serious expression on her face. “So how will you handle them? No offense, but the four of you didn’t do so hot tonight.”

Everyone’s silent for a few, long moments. It gives Tabby an opening to bring over the food and set it out. No one touches their meal, their arms folded, their heads down. Oak picks up her head and starts to tuck into her turkey club, waving a potato chip lazily in the air. “Talk it out maybe? We could like... get between her and them and explain she’s a victim of a ritual gone wrong like me and show them her ID. Say she’s learned her lesson like the rest of us. Then they’ll just update their database or whatever and leave us alone. They can follow a trail of unreality, but it doesn’t seem like they can pinpoint the source. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have been searching and

interviewing people, he would've come right to us like they did five years ago. We've taken... precautions to not be easily found. We can just disavow knowledge of what's going on."

"And if they go to one of your shows?"

Lily puts down her reuben and wipes her hands on a napkin. "Nothing to be done about that. That's how Coy expresses herself and we aren't going to make her change that for the world. Nor should she. One of them will see one of our posters or see one of our shows someday, so it's a moot point. We can explain some of it as really advanced phantasmagoria and projected film trickery, the rest as trade secrets. We're protected by law to not give out the secrets of how we perform, I know our rights. We'll just have to go with Oak's idea. What else can we do? I think it's our only option."

Sunflower tosses it around her brain a bit. "A valid point."

Hemlock hasn't touched her burger at all. She just leans back, arms folded, staring at Sunflower. Even the head on her beer remains. She's had enough. "Hey Sunflower... Whaddya care?" Sunflower says nothing, she just averts her eyes and looks down at her shrimp fra diavolo. "Yeah, we're forgive and forget people, but we still don't trust cops, and that includes the Crossguards. So why the sudden change of heart towards us after years of

bullying us? It can't just be Coy's sappy speech. Gathering intel on us for your mission? Learning our moves before we make them?"

Sunflower shakes her head slowly, hanging her head a bit. "No, Hemlock, it's nothing like that at all. It was in large part Sequoia's speech. It made me realize just how far I've strayed from the path I promised myself I'd always follow. I let myself become a Crossguard instead of an adventurer. I swore to use my skills only to protect people, and instead I was using them to punish people. It was... a strong reality check. The way I flew off the handle last month... I had let my frustration and anger with my situation interfere with my reason and heart to the point I nearly threw away everything I ever believed in, all for the sake of pride and my job. Hell, I *have* been doing that for the past six years when it comes to the three of you. I was raised on discipline and self-control my whole life. It's like your carefree and irresponsible lifestyle scoffed at everything I believed in, just as I'm sure my authoritative attitude pushed every button of yours over the years. Please understand, I really am remorseful for my attitude over the years. As I've said before, I'm here as a friend, not a Crossguard. Nothing leaves this table. I know you have little reason to trust me... but I really do care about Sequoia. And you three. She helped me realize it."

Hemlock doesn't change her expression nor her stance. Lily, however, gets a big nasty grin on her face and

leans towards Sunflower, her eyes half closed in a teasing manner. "Sounds like sooooooomeone's crushing."

Sunflower's taken aback. "What?"

Lily nods, grinning wide. "Yeah! Sunny has such a big ol' crush on Coy Coy, she can't help but watch her from afar and sigh wistfully."

Sunflower looks slightly annoyed. "You've been talking to Sarah too much."

Lily clasps her hands together, rolling her eyes to the ceiling in mock innocence. "Coy's all like, oh no! I encountered a KnoC! Whatever shall I do?"

Oak closes her eyes and grins, folding her arms and puffing herself up. "And Sunflower's all like heh... don't worry little lady, I'll save you from that horrible KnoC. I totally am only watching you out of concern, yep, that's it, nothing romantic about this at all."

Lily fawns over Oak, draping her arms around her neck and leaning into her, her eyes pleading up to her. "Oh Sunflower! You're my hero! Do me right here, except alas, we're of two different worlds! It'll never work out! Yet..." Lily's enjoying her newfound ability to tease her tormentor of the past six years.

Sequoia laughs nervously between bites of her burrito. "H-hey!"

That's broken Hemlock's guard. "Haha, I think this is the first time I've actually appreciated this bit."

Sunflower shuts her eyes and takes a big bite of her food. "The four of you are the worst."

Lily slides off Oak and picks up her sandwich. "Hehe, yep, we're pretty awesome alright."

Hemlock's expression softens and she starts tucking into her burger. Her point isn't quite made yet. "Alright Sunflower. I'm willing to trust you... but you get the same deal you gave Coy a month ago. You only have one chance. If you blow it, well, not even a story will get us to talk to you again. Does that work for the rest of you?" The other three nod.

Sunflower smiles through her chewing. "I won't betray that trust. Thank you."

"Pfft, whatever." Hemlock turns her empty beer mug upside down. "Listen to you all serious-like. You're at the carefree and irresponsible table, loosen up."

Lily scoops up some fallen kraut up with some fries. "You still owe us that story. So how about it, Sunflower? Wanna tell us here, or we can go to the beach and dig a fire pit, tell it over a bonfire."

"How about in front of a fire? I think that's the best place for a story to be told." Sunflower looks around. "Plus it has a bit more... privacy."



Lily grins at Sunflower. "Good choice. Super romantic. Coy'll be putty in your hands."

Sequoia lets out her breath and slumps forward. "Yeah right."

Hemlock tilts her chair back, stretching out. "Well, since we're here for at least another hour while things cool down, I might as well regale you all with a harrowing tale of life in the wilds."

Oak rolls her eyes. "Here she goes."

Lily's head falls into her arms folded on the table. "The fact I'm not being stricken deaf is proof that Cecilia isn't a loving goddess." Sequoia just laughs.

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It's paranoia that causes Hemlock to peek her head out the tavern's door and look around, but this time you can't really blame her. She motions for the others to follow and everyone spills out into the chill of the night. The alleyways and streets leading from the Boar to the rest of town are far too narrow for them to stand shoulder to shoulder. Lily and Oak hang back, Sequoia being the only one brave enough to walk with Sunflower as Hemlock leads them to Feymist Ave. Hemlock turns her head over her shoulder. "Hey Sunflower, you ever commit a crime?"

Sunflower nervously rubs her neck. "Well... I stole some apples once."

Sequoia looks up at Sunflower. “Apples?”

Sunflower nods. “Yeah, I was on my training pilgrimage and part of that was not carrying any money with me. Live the life of an ascetic to sharpen the mind and body. I couldn’t find any game for two days, and I came across a village that didn’t need a sword for any reason. I begged for some food but they turned their backs to me, so, while their backs were turned, I stole a few apples and ran. I swore to pay them back as soon as I could.”

Hemlock holds up a hand as she pops her head out onto the avenue and looks around. She nods and stuffs her hands in her coat pockets and walks out onto Feymist Ave, hanging back to stand next to Sunflower as the rest of the gals follow her. “Didja?”

Sunflower shakes her head and clasps her hands behind her. “No, I never did. It was a long while before I came across a place that needed my skills and by then I thought to myself, forget it, they’re too far away. They don’t deserve the dollar or whatever it cost for those apples.”

“Damn straight.” Hemlock crosses her arms and nods. “Anyone who won’t share food with a starving person deserves it.”

“How about you? Have you all committed crimes?”

Hemlock looks straight down into Sunflower's eyes, one of the few people who can physically do so. "Yeah of course. We're unsavory folks that draw the ire of the Crossguards, remember?"

Sunflower's hands twitch behind her and she lulls her head side to side. "It's not like I ever caught you committing actual crimes. Well, except for taking books from the dry dumpster at the college. And loitering. And the whole thing with the guild wall. And that time you were topless on the beach. And petty theft. And..." Sunflower trails off.

Hemlock throws her hands up in the air. "See, it's petty shit like that. Our crimes are loitering, creating a disturbance just by existing, not having one of a billion licenses, stealing from grocery stores when we ain't got any dough, 'indecent exposure' by having our shirts off on the beach, shit like that. It's shit that doesn't harm anybody and exists only to make good people who don't fall in line into criminals. Hungry people should be given food. People should be allowed to gather wherever they want. Women oughta have the same rules as men. If something's in the trash, it's gonna get converted to fuel anyways, might as well put it to better use than letting some person stay in their personal pollution bubble instead of taking the bus."

Sunflower flashes a grin up at Hemlock. "Says the one who lives and travels around in a van."

Hemlock frowns and crosses her arms. "Hey now, we usually just park somewhere and take public transit around when we're in a large enough city. Fuel's expensive and that van is massive. Ain't our fault there's not an intercontinental railway that we can use to haul our junk from place to place. We ain't like those Framboise jokers. Ain't no way for us to make our bread without that van."

Sunflower grimaces and rubs the back of her neck. "Sorry, I didn't mean any offense, I was just doing gentle ribbing among friends."

Hemlock's eyes go wide for a moment and then soften. "Ah, sorry 'bout that. Taking some getting used to not being defensive around you." Sunflower says nothing, averting her gaze and clasping her hands behind her back again. Hemlock goes to pat her on the shoulder but decides against it. She faces forward and digs her hands in her coat pockets. "Don't worry about it. We'll get in a groove in time. Provided you stop by and see us whenever we cross paths."

"I promise I will."

Lily calls from behind. "So you went on a training pilgrimage too?"

Sunflower hangs back to walk next to Lily and Oak. Oak makes sure she's on the other side of Lily. "'Too?' I didn't know you did as well."

Lily looks up at her and shakes her head, swinging her hand clasped around Oak's. "Not me, I meant mom."

Sunflower tilts her head. "Oh, Birch. Yeah. Three years on the road."

"Three years? So what, that'd make you... thirteen when you started?"

Sunflower nods. "That's right. It ended with me joining the Crossguards and getting involved in that mess in Rainsoaked."

"Did you ever write to your folks? Visit home again?"

Sunflower's quiet for a few moments. "...No. I grew up in an orphanage in Bluke, Brezitella."

Lily rubs the back of her neck. "Ah... sorry about that. Didn't mean to be insensitive."

Sunflower shakes her head and looks down at Lily. "It's not anything to be sorry for, you didn't know. The headmaster was an old, old warrior who decided to spend her sunset years raising orphans. She'd tell us stories of her travels and would train us in swordsmanship and martial arts. She was strict, but fair, and very kind."

"From that 'was' I imagine things didn't turn out happily."

"Well, I did say she was very old..." Sunflower looks ahead of her, off in the distance. "When she passed, we all

went our separate ways, some honing their skills on the road such as myself, some getting jobs where they could, others apprenticing themselves to a different master.”

“Have you ever kept up with any of them?”

“Not in particular. I’ve met a few that became Crossguards, but all connections we had with each other were severed when our master died.”

“What was your master’s name? Maybe mom’s heard of her.”

“...It’s not important.”

Lily shrugs. “Ok? Didn’t mean to touch on a sensitive topic.”

Sunflower shakes her head. “It’s not that, it’s just... difficult to explain. Birch for sure knew her, I’ll say that much.”

“How do you know about mom, anyways?”

Sunflower shrugs. “Any serious warrior has heard of Birch. It’s a small community, and her reputation is... legendary.”

There’s a long few moments of silence as the gals hit the boards, turning south, the ocean to their left. Room to stretch out. Sequoia hangs back and wraps an arm around Oak’s shoulders, leaning into her and resting her head on

Oak's shoulder. "You never did say if you got any interesting mail or not."

Oak's expression grows distant and blank, her ears bending back, her voice uncharacteristically hollow. "Huh? Oh, yeah, I guess I didn't." There's a long few moments of silence and she wraps her arm around Sequoia's waist, rubbing her side and recovering some of herself. "Sorry, I didn't mean to go all weird on ya. It's just... Yeah, you could say I got some interesting mail. I got a letter from Ficus and Stephen. They said they wanted to see me next time I'm in town but didn't explain why."

Sequoia's eyes go wide. "Whoa, that's huge! When was the last time you saw them?"

"When I left home eight years ago."

"Seriously?! So they never met you after..."

Oak leans into Sequoia and shakes her head. "Nope. Actually, it's kind of funny, one day three years ago we were all in Yama, walking to the grocery store, when they came walking in the opposite direction. The jig was up, too late to even hide behind Hemlock, only they didn't even so much as look in our direction. They just kept walking as if we were just random strangers on the street. They didn't even recognize me." She shrugs. "Not like I can blame them, really. I don't look even a little bit like I used to. If they never look at our posters, they would've had no way of knowing that it was me."

Lily squeezes Oak's hand. "You know you don't actually have to go, babe. We don't need to talk to those jerks."

Oak squeezes back and swishes her tail against Lily. "Yeah. I'm still debating it. But I also don't want them just showing up at one of our shows and having to deal with it then anyways, y'know?"

Lily leans up and pecks Oak on the cheek. "Whatever you decide, I'll be right there next to you."

Oak leans her head against Lily's, turning and kissing her temple. "Thanks Lil." She gives a short laugh. "Maybe we should call your folks to come with us. I'd like to see them try to talk down to me with Birch around, or the expressions on their faces when Zevon suggests they swing."

Sequoia busts out laughing. "Haha gross! Well, if you want someone even freakier looking than you around to make you seem normal in comparison, or if you want a feather or a fly or something to magically fly into their mouth whenever they speak, I'm there for you."

Hemlock turns around and walks backwards, flexing her arm and kissing her bicep. "And if you need someone to pound them into the ground like a stake, you can have my fist."



Oak laughs nervously. “Th-that’s not necessary gals. I think if I do go it’ll be just a Lily and me thing. No offense, but it’s just kinda... personal.”

Hemlock hangs back and walks next to Sequoia. Luckily, the boards are wide enough where even five gals walking side by side allows enough room for others. She drops her hand on Sequoia’s head and ruffles the hair between her horns playfully. “No sweat, we were only joking anyways, ain’t that right Coy?”

Sequoia laughs. “Joking nothing, that’d be hilarious! I wonder how many flies I can get them to swallow before they realize something’s up.”

Sunflower crosses her arms and leans forward to look over at Oak. “I think you should go, Oak. It’s better to face your fears rather than cover before them. You’ll come out the other end stronger for it, and without the consuming thought of what could’ve been.”

Oak leans forward to look at her and laughs even more nervously than usual. “It figures you’d say something like that. Thanks Sunflower.” Oak notices Sequoia’s head roll off her shoulder as she looks up at the stars, obviously in brain scanning mode. “You can just come out and say it, Coy.”

Sequoia snaps out of it and gazes at Oak. “Oh, I was just thinking of what you said earlier. I get not recognizing

you or knowing who Hemlock was, but wouldn't they have recognized Lily?"

"Haha, nothing escapes you, does it? I keep forgetting about your laser focus. They've never met Lily. Well, after age like, six. I always went over to her house to play, she never came over to mine."

"Seriously? All those years growing up and never once did she visit your place?"

Oak's face grows a bit red. "Nope. It ah... let me be myself."

Sequoia slumps slightly. "I guess that makes sense. Man, that was anticlimactic."

Lily looks over at Sequoia. "Still looking for a cool narrative arc to everything?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"Sorry Coy. That one's simple. Even before everything her... 'parents' always were pretty distant. They never had much of an interest in her school or friendships, so long as she brought in good report cards and didn't get many calls from her teachers." Lily shrugs. "Fine by me, they're a buncha stuffed shirts. From what I remember and the way Oak tells it, Stephen was always on the phone talking to business partners, and Ficus was constantly glued to the set. Way more fun over at my place where we can watch

mom beat the stuffing out of some poor teenager or help dad fix up an old engine.”

Hemlock nods at the next set of stairs leading down to the beach. “We’re far enough south where we won’t be disturbed. Let’s head down.” Everyone takes off their shoes and boots, tying the laces together and hanging around their necks, stuffing their socks in the necks of their shoes. They head down, and comb the dunes for debris to start a fire. Usually, creating a fire would be a snap, literally, but... after the scare earlier, it’s better to do this mundanely.

Sequoia reaches down for a sizable piece of dried out driftwood just as Sunflower does. Their hands land on either side of it, and they look up at each other and laugh. “You take it.” Sunflower gathers it up into the bundle in her arms. “So why don’t you like to be called Sunny, anyways? And why not call me Coy like the others?”

Sunflower scoops up some dead reeds. “It just feels diminutive, is all, and a little too... Familiar. I’m used to keeping people at a distance. I don’t like attention or crowds, and making friends has been... tough. When everyone sees you as a big famous hero, they treat you differently. No one really sees the person you are, only what you’ve done. You’re a symbol to them, not a person. You lose touch with familiarity and closeness.”

Sequoia walks over to the pit Hemlock’s digging and drops her bundle in, just as Lily and Oak drop theirs in.

“But we don’t see you or treat you that way. You can have that familiarity with us, you don’t need to keep us at arm’s length. Why not accept that you finally found some people who see you for you and drop that barrier?”

Sunflower drops in her own bundle and takes a seat. “I don’t think... I’m quite ready for that yet. It’s hard to come back from that feeling of needing to distance yourself.”

Sequoia sits down next to her. “We’ll wear you down. The day you call me Coy is the day I know I can call you Sunny. I look forward to that day.”

Lily sits across from them and to the side so she can still see them when the fire gets ignited. Her eyes half closed in her classic teasing face as she slaps on a wicked grin. “Gaaaaaaaaaaaaay. It’s so cute how gay for each other you are. Don’t you know audiences hate it when two people like each other and keep dancing around it? Just kiss and get it over with already.”

Sequoia and Sunflower both recoil, speaking in unison. “That’s!”

Lily laughs wickedly. This mouse is having fun batting around the cat for once. “Haha you’re already in synch with each other! It took months for Oak and I to be that in synch. That’s fate, gals.”

Sunflower droops her head and shakes it. “Now I’m remembering why I hated the three of you so much.”

“You know you love it. I haven’t heard you two say you *don’t* like each other.”

Sequoia moves her hands in front of her, flustered. “That’s because that’s just plain old rude! I may be a rude gal but I’m not *rude*.”

Lily turns her grin on Sequoia. “So you’re saying you don’t like Sunflower.”

“No! Yes! No! I’m! Lily!”

“Hehe. Well, you two will get over it in time. If it speeds things along, I promise to not tease when you two finally give in to each other.”

Hemlock takes a reed and lights the end of it with her lighter. She pokes it into the pile of debris, making sure the fire gets started. Everyone huddles close to the growing fire to escape the bitter wind coming off the sea. In time, the fire and wind find equilibrium and everyone gets comfortable. Lily folds up her legs, Oak’s head in her lap, Lily petting between her ears. Hemlock pokes the fire with a stick, ensuring it stays lit. Sequoia leans back on her hands, her legs kicked out. Sunflower bunches her knees up to her chin. “I uhm, don’t know how to start. I’ve never really told a story like this before.”

Sequoia shrugs. “Just say the first words that come to mind and go from there. Stories don’t really have a beginning or end, so finding one is pointless.”

“Ok. ...” Sunflower stares into the fire and draws herself up a bit, steeling herself. “There was once a cabin in the woods, with a long dirt path that led to a lonely two lane road that itself led, eventually, to a busy avenue, which itself gave way to an interstate. In this cabin lived three people: a mother, a father, and a daughter. They kept two goats, some chickens, and grew their own vegetables. They were isolated, but not disconnected, as they had a truck they used to get dry goods from a nearby village. Once a week, the father would go into town to collect broken machines left for him at the post office, and he would bring back machines he picked up and repaired the previous week. They weren’t well known by the village, but they were respected, because they were useful to the people, repairing their electronics and occasionally giving away their excess eggs, meat, cheese, and vegetables during harvest.

“Now nearish to this cabin, further down the two lane road, was an orphanage, also tucked into the woods, altho none of the children knew of the cabin. Except for one. One girl liked to go off into the woods when she wasn’t supposed to, swinging around a wooden stick she pretended was a sword, and one day came across the daughter of the cabin. To the girl’s surprise, the daughter

was scared of her at first. Putting the stick down and plucking a flower from a tree branch, she approached the daughter slowly. Cautiously, she handed the flower to the girl, who even more cautiously accepted it, and ran away. The girl, undeterred, would look for the cabin each time she set off into the woods, meeting the daughter who eventually stopped running away and they became close friends. They would play knight and princess in the woods, or hide and seek, or any number of children's imagination games. Eventually, the girl came to be accepted by the daughter's family as a regular guest. They opened their house to her, and she came and went as she pleased, playing with their daughter, helping care for the animals, tilling the soil, and preparing meals. They didn't adopt her, as she didn't want to be adopted, but it was the closest thing to a normal family the girl could remember.

“One thing she was forbidden from was entering the repair room. It was the only room in the house with no windows. The father, a stoic but kind man, said he needed total concentration and silence to repair the machines, and to play outside whenever he was working. And so the girls did. Now this girl, she was in training to be a warrior like her master and mother figure. This had the unfortunate side effect of making her more brave than smart. She was dying to know what was going on in that room, and eventually she swallowed her fear of getting into trouble and braved the dangers of opening that door. Her friend, the daughter, tried to stop her, but as was

always the case she simply followed along with the girl's plans. Upon opening the door, to their amazement, they saw the father in the middle of the floor, daggers sunk into the floor, sitting in the middle of a chalk circle, making shapes in the air with his hands, and the machines... they were putting themselves back together. The rust and dirt sloughed off and gave way to clean metal, twisted up wrecked parts straightened out and reconnected to their housing. It was as if each part of a machine was a droplet of water in a fog cloud. The father, he saw the two girls peeking through the door, and simply uttered 'shh.' while he finished his work. Too stunned to move a muscle, they watched, silently, as the work was completed.

“To their surprise, the father didn't scold them. Not at all, in fact, he called the family together. He announced it was time his daughter learned the secrets and trade of the family. You see, they were ritualists, living far out in the woods out of fear of what the villagers might do if they found out. And to the girl from the orphanage, they wanted to share these rituals and secrets, seeing as how she was as close to them as family. They were a very giving and kind family. And so began the two girls' training. The girl from the orphanage would hone her combat skills by day, learn simple rituals and tricks by night, and slept infrequently. This went on for many years. Eventually, her stick was replaced with a bokken. Simple transmutation rituals were replaced with spatial dislocation rituals. Her



bokken was later replaced with a real sword as big as her tiny body, and her fluidity in ritual casting had earned her a sort of... Journeyman rank in rituals. The two girls, who had spent much of their lives as close friends, were starting to become something more.

“Then came the day the master of the girl from the orphanage died. She and her fellow students mourned and buried her, and, seeing as how all but one of them were of the age to find work and there was no one left to teach them, they decided to scatter to the wind. Some found work, others became drifters on a warrior’s pilgrimage, others turned to organizations like the Crossguards, others apprenticed themselves to new masters. Only the youngest, the girl with a head full of rituals and a heart full of love, was left. She didn’t know what to do. She was too young to find the sort of work that would house and feed her, she ached to further her training, and her heart kept her from starting a pilgrimage or finding a new master. Alone, that is. Upon realizing that, she ran through the forest to the girl she loved, and begged for her to come with her on her pilgrimage. The mother overheard this and was furious. After all the kindness they had shown the girl, after all the acceptance, she came not to stay with them, but to splinter their family apart, take their daughter from them before she was even an adult. Stupid and stubborn, the girl from the orphanage refused to relent, grabbing her love’s wrist to drag her away with her. The mother, a highly adept

ritualist herself, froze the girl in place as she rewrote the reality of her daughter's memory to exclude the girl from the orphanage entirely. The backlash? The backlash left a bloody slash across the mother's shoulder, and the father, noticing something was wrong, came rushing out to see what was going on. The mother said the girl had tried taking their daughter away, and when the mother fought back, she had attacked with her sword. The father, furious and who could blame him, rewrote the reality of the cabin's location, leaving the shocked girl alone, on her knees, staring at a small clearing in the trees and shrubs. In just a few short minutes, she undid her entire world. Disillusioned, she became a wanderer, drifting from village to village, town to town, swearing to not let herself get that close to someone again.

“In time, the girl became a woman, much earlier than she thought she would. After many hardships, battles, and painful experiences, she found herself with an unbelievable opportunity: the ability to rewrite the reality of history to exclude that moment. She had the world in her hands like putty, all of history and time and space stopped around her, ready to be molded by her hands, knowing she would never have this opportunity again. And the woman... couldn't bring herself to do it. She could've searched through space to find the location of the girl she loved, could've rewrote her mind to include her once again, to know the reality of that day. Hell, she could've even rewritten the past to fix her mistake three

years ago. But she left the girl's mind still, her location unknown, and remolded the world the way it was, without exception. Her love wouldn't let her do anything else. It was at that moment she gained the wisdom and strength to accept reality as it was, and move on. And that's the end of my story. The four of you are the only people I've ever told that to." The other four are quiet, all staring at Sunflower, eyes wide. Sunflower rubs the back of her neck nervously. "Was it really that bad?"

Lily starts clapping. "No way! That was incredible!"

Hemlock laughs gently. "You sure you ain't ever told a story before?"

Oak's sitting up now, leaning forward towards Sunflower. "Did you look for her after? As a Crossguard you could go anywhere you wanted right?"

Sunflower shakes her head and draws her knees up tighter. "No, I never did, and never will. If there comes a day that I ever see her again and recognize her, it has been thirteen years after all, I'll simply nod and continue the direction I was heading. Our paths diverged long ago."

Sequoia's head is hung and she hunches up in a ball. "It's so sad... What good is reality when it rips you apart from someone you love without reason?"

Sunflower unfurls, kicking her legs out and reaches out to rub Sequoia's shoulder. "You determine your own

reality, Sequoia. You don't need to be a demon or a ritualist to shape your world. My reality is the one where pain is a necessary part of growth, and this reality still affords me the opportunity for love just as strong, if not stronger."

Lily starts to tease, but her heart's only half in it now. "Like with Coy Coy~" Sunflower spoiled her fun with that story. Typical.

To everyone's surprise, Sunflower merely shrugs. "Who knows? Maybe. The future is the only thing all of us can mold how we see fit." Sequoia just bunches her knees up to her chin and buries her face in them, not saying anything. Sunflower laughs. "Finally left you speechless, eh? Then my story had the impact I desired. And now..." she stands up and arcs her back, cracking it, then gazes down at everyone. "It's probably time I head out. I need to check in with the guild before I set out tomorrow."

Lily looks up at Sunflower. "Still investigating the university's summoning experiment?"

Sunflower nods. "That's right. I have a number of leads to follow up on outside of Feymist. I set out tomorrow morning."

The nervousness has eased its way out of Oak's voice and posture. She smiles up at Sunflower. "How are you traveling?"

“The guild sets me up with airship tickets. From there, I take public transit or walk, depending on the distance. Rarely, I’ll call a cab if a lead takes me away from where public transit doesn’t go.”

Hemlock’s tenseness seems to have gone the way of Oak’s nervousness. She leans back on her hands and looks up at Sunflower. “Hey Sunflower. ... You’re a good egg, y’know that? I’m real happy you told us that story. Next time tho, tell us a happier one. We’ll be sure to share ours too.”

Lily’s fun is over, but that just means she can let herself be sincere. “Seriously, you’re always welcome at our camp and shows. We’d love to have you around.”

Oak gives Sunflower a friendly wave. “See you around, Sunflower. And hey, if we’re ever going the same way, never be afraid to ask for a lift. We have a couch and everything.”

Sunflower smiles quietly at all of them. “I’ll keep that in mind. Good night, gals.” She walks away, heading up the stairs to the boardwalk.

She’s barely to the top of the stairs when Sequoia snaps out of her melancholy and shouts “Hey Sunflower! Wait up!” and she dashes off after her.

Oak flops back onto Lily’s lap and looks up at her. “You may have taken that teasing too far, hon”

Lily looks down at Oak and scratches between her ears. “Nah. I just gave them the reality check they needed.”

Sequoia reaches Sunflower as she’s in the middle of the boardwalk. She puffs, hunching over and putting her hands on her knees. “Huff... huff... I can’t wait for this night to be over so I can stop running.” She straightens herself out. “Hey uhm... did you really mean what you said down there?”

Sunflower faces Sequoia, standing close to her. “Every word.”

“I... I don’t get it still. If you had to put the world back together, why not allow yourself that happiness? You already did more than anyone should ever be asked to do, why not carve out something for yourself?”

Sunflower looks up at the stars for a long few moments before leveling her gaze with Sequoia’s. “Love is the only thing that can push through the barrier between dreams and reality, Sequoia. If it was truly meant to be, if we truly loved each other in that timeless, final way, we wouldn’t need any rituals or reality rewriting. It never would’ve happened to begin with. Isn’t that how you got up here?”

Sequoia gets it, but it doesn’t exactly pick up her mood. “Maybe you’re right. Sunflower... I... I just wanted to say...” She rubs her arm for a moment before reaching back in her pocket. She pulls out the sunflower she made

when they first met. “Here. I really want you to have this metal sunflower. To remember me by on your journey.”

Sunflower shakes her head. “What would you wear in your lapel before shows? No, I don’t think so. It’ll make me happier knowing you’re holding onto a piece of me while we’re apart.”

Sequoia’s face gets darker and she starts to get flustered. She tries to pull out a sentence but only manages an “Uhm!”

Sunflower laughs brightly, genuinely, without reservation. “Now I know demons can blush. Remember what I said, Sequoia. You can make reality whatever you want it to be, you just have to push on that barrier. You don’t need magic.”

Sequoia starts to recover a bit and gives a small, lopsided grin. “That’s not gonna stop me from being an awful little shit as much as I can get away with, tho.”

Sunflower puts her hand on Sequoia’s shoulder and squeezes. “I wouldn’t want it any other way. Good night, Sequoia. Stay safe.” She holds her hand there, looking into Sequoia’s eyes for a few moments, then drops her hand reluctantly and turns around, waving as she walks up the boards towards Feymist Ave.

Sequoia just stands there, still holding out the metal sunflower. She drops her arm, but still clutches it. Her

voice is quiet and small; not even the wind can pick it up. “Good night, Sunflower. Remember your own words. And if what you said is true... see you soon.” She heads back down the steps and plops herself heavily in front of the fire and looks at the metal sunflower. “Can you believe she still won’t accept this thing? Man, I think I’m going to be saddled with it til the end times.”

Lily crosses her arms and grins. “Saddled with it’, eh? Is that why you keep it on you all the time?”

Sequoia slips it back in her pocket, feeling self-conscious. “It just feels... comforting to have on me, is all. It’s the first permanent piece of art I ever made.” Her head turns to the giant next to her. “You sure warmed up to her quick, didn’t you Hemlock?”

Hemlock looks down at Sequoia and laughs. “Not as quick as a certain blushing demon I could mention. Seriously, you all accepted her way before I even thought of trusting her. Still not sure I do. Something about her sudden about-face has got me on edge.”

Lily shakes her head. “You’re reading too much into it, Lock. People can change and learn to let go of hate and start to love. They just need the right push. If anything, she’s holding back still.”

Hemlock’s head turns to look at the moon shining over the ocean. “Maybe. I’ll guess we’ll see. If’n we even come across her anytime soon.” Hemlock puts her hands



on her knees and grunts as she pushes herself onto her feet. “C’mon gals, let’s douse the fire and head back to the van. We got an early day ahead of us.”

“I got it.” The fire instantly snuffs out, its ruin already cold and ashy, the scare from earlier already largely forgotten. Sequoia may need to be careful, but fire safety’s worth the risk. The gals walk up the stairs and up the boards, not even bothering to put their shoes back on. The trek back home is long, but that’s ok. That just gives them all that much more time with each other. Hemlock scoops Lily up who laughs madly and kicks her feet until Hemlock puts her back down. Oak and Sequoia hold hands, their tails swaying against each other’s, and Lily joins them, wedging herself inbetween them and wrapping her arms around their waists. Hemlock wraps her long arm around all their shoulders and pulls them close to her, and they walk in a clattering, leaving room for others to get by. Not that anyone would approach the laughing, chattering mess. There’s another side of the street after all. They don’t care. The night is theirs, and the moon is the only one allowed to judge them. It shines brightly in the sky, its beams falling on their backs, urging them up Feymist Ave for the last time this tour. They push back, taking their time.

The northernmost 1/8th of the Windswept continent may be taken up by Arclight, or not depending on who you ask, certainly inaccessible at any rate, but this by no means makes it a small continent. That's not to say the next two weeks don't go by quickly. It's the driving between places that feels the longest, often taking half a day to get anywhere. The gals abandon their carefree Feymist schedule out of necessity, traveling and performing at a breakneck pace. No time off for good behavior.

They arrive first in Plankspire, a ramshackle town hiding the best outdoor market on the eastern seaboard. The buildings are all made out of reclaimed metal and wood from shipwrecks and ruined vehicles. The residents are in a constant state of working; if you aren't maintaining the buildings, you're fixing the plumbing and electricity. If you're not doing that, you're hawking fresh goods pulled out of the sea and produce from the fertile lands outside of town. The culture of perpetual labor and community has made the people of Plankspire rowdy, but honest and fun-loving. They're probably the most appreciative crowd the gals come across. They pull out all the stops for Plankspire, putting on their best shows, going all out on the sfx, running three shows a day for three days to ensure everyone has a chance to take a break from their work to relax. Tips are poor, but it's not

about the tips when it comes to Plankspire. That's what the month in Feymist is for.

Then it's up the coast for a weekend tour in Deuter, a port town mostly made up of former sailors. Who better to run a port town where sailors come and go like the ebb and flow of the sea? The crowds are thin, but the intimacy just means a closer connection with the people. They talk with people after the shows just as long as the shows go on, absorbing their tales of life on the sea. Tips are good. They drift further inland, to Raven's Gulch, and donate their three days there to helping the town recover from a flood. They stuff themselves with coffee and high energy food so they can give their all for the shows at night. They don't put the donation box out for these shows. The village of Harmony is on the southern Brezitellan border, and their last stop before arriving in Yama. Some people would call it backwards, but the gals would probably say "it's... traditional." They only play music here, but that's ok. The whole village comes out to dance with each other, an impromptu festival born from the mere fact there's live music playing. Sequoia's fiddle manages to overcome the people's wariness of her, but not so much that the task of working the donation box isn't taken up by Lily.

Hemlock wasn't fooling, every town has its own history and beauty and charm, and Sequoia opens herself to it completely, awed by the vast differences in both the landscape and the personalities of people in each town.

Her perspective of each town is down the barrel of their shows, there's simply no time to relax and explore, but that makes each conversation before and after the shows and each meal at a local tavern all the more special to her. By the time she becomes accustomed to the culture of a place, they're on the move again, leaving her with a perfect snapshot of the town in her memory.

She thinks of Feymist often. Each town they visit feels as temporary as their time there, and even if they had longer tours, she gets the impression she wouldn't feel any more at home. But each time she feels the ache of being away from what became home to her, they're at a new town, new experiences to take in, new adventures to embark on, and the ache recedes under the wash of excitement. Lily was right too, life on the road isn't as romantic as people think it is. It's hard, taxing, leaves you with a feeling of being disconnected. But that disconnection gives way to a feeling of freedom, the kind of freedom you feel when you start falling from a great height and you *know* there's nothing to be done but plummet. It's exhilarating. Oak has the right of it. Any other way of life would be unbearable to Sequoia. She thinks of Feymist, but dreams of the next town.

Sequoia is looking down into her bowl of stew, smiling as she listens to Lily talk on the phone. If she was more aware of cell phones, if she had grown up with them like the gals have, she would be surprised there's even

reception out on the edge of the woods like this. The continent's developing. It's been since Feymist that they've been able to camp out like they're doing now. There were lots of cold sandwiches and cereal on the road. She had almost forgotten how much she enjoyed the smell of percolating coffee and smoke, how much she enjoyed eating out of a big communal pot of food. It's the stew's greatest spice.

The conversation seems to be going well. Lily had reserved their stage time months in advance, but as is always the case with these things, you want to confirm the reservation before actually arriving. Plans change. Other acts pull out, or the reservation goes forgotten and it gets double booked. It's the former this time, and Lily saw this as an opportunity she coyly refused to share the details of with the others. Sequoia's been with Lily long enough to know when she's trying to keep the excitement out of her voice. This is one of those times, until Lily's eyes suddenly light up and she clutches the phone tighter against her ear. "Really?! That's... that's wonderful! Thank you so much! Don'tcha worry none, we'll knock their socks off. None of our anti-comedy or flops for this. Haha, heard about that did you? Word travels far, I guess. You're just gonna have to see it for yourself. They still don't require tickets to get onto the grounds and see the shows, right? Good good. Yeah, we're insistent. No no, go ahead. You can't overhype this, I guarantee it. Pffft they can try! Mhm. Ok. You too, thank you sooooo much again. See you then. Kiss kiss.

Bye.” She pulls the phone away from her face and snaps it shut before putting it down, finally able to tuck into her stew. It’s hard to eat around a smile that big, but she manages.

Oak’s hearing is real sharp, but even she couldn’t hear the other end of that conversation. She lets the silence settle over the fire for a long few moments, hoping Lily spills the beans. Of course she doesn’t. “Well? What was that all about?”

Lily looks up from her stew and grins at everyone. “Hehe. Guess what we’re doing.”

“I can’t imagine...” Oak’s eyes go wide. “Wait. No way. You can’t mean...”

Lily nods, pride written across her face. “Yep. We’re performing each night at the Teufelnacht festival.”

Oak’s smile somehow gets as wide as her eyes. “Aaaaah seriously?! I can’t believe it!”

Even Hemlock looks excited. She tries to put on her usual cool demeanor, but her face utterly betrays her. “How the hell did you manage that one? Don’t they usually have those Pomme guys perform?”

Lily nods at Sequoia. “Ask Coy.”

Sequoia tilts her head. “Me? What’d I do?”

“Kick ass in Feymist, apparently.” Lily slurps up some more stew before it gets cold. “The theater manager, Briar, is good friends with Sally, Feymist’s theater manager, and heard about our new ‘sfx guru’ and some of our more spectacular shows. The Pomme Poivrée Theater Company pulled out this year due to a membership shakeup, so she decided to give us a chance at the festival for once. She even said she’d give us the same level of advertisement that she gives to the Pomme Poivrée! We’ll need to give her some posters ahead of time, and firm up which shows we’re doing way ahead of time, and get our picture taken, but we’ll be on the front of the flyers and even prominently featured in the paper’s article on the festival! She did make me promise we’d do some pretty impressive stuff.” Lily’s grin spreads wider. “No worries about that part, at least.”

Sequoia puts her finger to her chin and looks up at the moon. “What’s this Teufelnacht festival? Is it a big deal?”

Oak nods, still smiling broadly. “It’s the big, week-long spring festival in Yama. There’s carnival games, rides, fair food, and of course live performances, and people come from all over Brezitella for it. Teufelnacht, traditionally, is about celebrating the arrival of spring and honoring the sprites and fey of the forest. The technical beginning of spring is much earlier, during the equinox, but the end of April is when people start to feel like it really is spring. Over

the years, it became less and less about sprites and fey and more about celebrating being able to go around at night without freezing your neck off. Being able to perform at the festival is a huge, huge deal. We've never been able to get a spot, we've always been on the other side of the festival. The Pomme Poivrée Theater Company isn't as big and well known as the Framboise Theater Company, but they have a solid reputation and following. We're small fry with no reputation to speak of at all." Oak stirs her stew, too excited to take another bite. "Until now, I guess. We *gotta* do the play about the Reveal. A festival for sprites and fey? It's like it was meant for it. Even if folks are religious, they'll think it's part of the tradition of the holiday and get blown away by the bit with the fire regardless."

Hemlock stuffs some stew in her mouth to mask her excitement. "The Marksman, too. Classic Teufelnacht play. The wolf glen scene will have the audience blown back in their seats."

"Don't forget it's basically a carnival fair these days. Gotta work the clown shtick in." Lily rolls her head about, evenly coating her brain with an idea. "Maybe we can combine that with the bullet catching trick. Get people all anxious and tense and then ease it out with some buffoonery. Stunts and comedy go together like salt and caramel."



Hemlock puts down her empty bowl, no longer able to hide behind it. "I love it. Both shows are pretty short too, it makes sense to combine them. Man, I can't believe it. I never thought we'd see the day we'd be on stage for Teufelnacht." There's a silence as everyone lets the news sink in.

Lily's smile grows a little smaller, and melancholy creeps into her voice as she puts down her own empty bowl. "Kinda feels like a loss of innocence, y'know? Having a reputation, I mean. It's not just that the pressure is on, it's that we used to be able to do whatever we felt like without worrying about disappointing folks. Purposeful flops, experimental works, anti-comedy... There were no expectations before, so we just had genuine people who enjoyed art for the sake of art. I don't want to lose that. Don't get me wrong, I'm appreciative of the opportunity, and Coy's sfx lets us do even crazier and weirder things and that's only a positive in my book, and we've always tried our best to entertain the audience, but... It's just that I don't want to let people down, y'know? And at the same time, I don't want us to lose that weird, often terrible uniqueness we bring. It's a weird place to be stuck in. I don't want to turn off the weirdos and outcasts we attract in favor of a mainstream audience, and adjust the way we do things for the sake of the audience." She shakes her head. "Nothing in the past few years has made me happier than you joining us, Coy. I wouldn't change the way we do things now for the world, and the way you

express yourself is just so... pure, beautiful, weird, unique. Not even mentioning that I love the hell outta you. You get it. It's the world I worry about, not you."

Oak slips her arm around Lily's shoulders and pulls her close. "We don't have to stop doing stuff like that, y'know. For major events like Teufelnacht, we can worry about the audience's enjoyment, but it's not like we're going to be doing that exclusively, or even often. Hell, we're still doing other shows in Yama besides Teufelnacht, there's no reason we have to depart from our usual antics. That last tour in Feymist, if anything, we attracted even more weird folks than usual. And think about all the towns inbetween Yama and Feymist. No one knew who we were the entire trip up. And all those towns between Yama and Brechdan, and beyond? They're not gonna have heard of us either. The reputation exists only in Yama and Feymist, where we already were pretty well known anyways. Plus, if the Pomme Poivrée didn't pull out, we wouldn't have this opportunity. We're second stringers, Briar didn't have any other options. You can't deny we were getting complacent, either. Now, we're rejuvenated, thinking more creatively and weirdly, not letting things like 'possibility' and 'reality' constrain us. No more routine. This is just doubt creeping back in, hon. Performing at Teufelnacht doesn't mean we're successful." Oak flashes a devilish grin at Lily. "It just means we have the opportunity to zap the squares even more than usual."

Sequoia laughs. “As if I wouldn’t go all out on the weirdness just because we’re doing it at a festival. You kidding? All those unsuspecting people? All the more reason to be goofy weirdos. We may never have this opportunity again, why worry about doing things their way? We have the chance to give the normies a *real* show, the way only we can. No need to allow us to be compared to these Pomme Poivrée people. So we can’t bomb on purpose or do things only we find funny. That doesn’t mean we can’t leave them utterly baffled at what they just saw. It’s like... it’s like the guild’s wall. Technically, I fixed those bricks, just like Sunflower asked me to. That didn’t stop me from being an awful little shit. Technically we have to wow them with quality shows. They just never said *how* we have to wow them. Hehe. They’ll never know what hit ‘em.”

Lily giggles in spite of herself. “Thanks, you two. I needed that wakeup call.” She gets up and stretches, collecting the empty dishes, ladling the leftover stew into them. Breakfast is taken care of. “Worst thing that happens, they don’t ask us to do the festival again, which isn’t any different than how we were operating two days ago. So tomorrow we hang posters and show Coy around the neighborhood, check in with the theater manager, and the day after we go say hi to my folks and have lunch and dinner there before the show. Can’t wait to see the look on their faces when they find out we’re doing

Teufelnacht this year. Dad'll *flip*." She brings the bowls into the van, then comes right back out.

Sequoia's head tracks Lily as she leaves the van. "So do your folks usually come to our shows?"

Lily nods. "Yep. They always manage to find time for them. They always talk about how good of a time they had, too. I'm grateful for how supportive they are. Sometimes, I feel like I let them down. The women of the family have all passed down our school of martial arts from mother to daughter for generations without exception til now. Once mom took over the gym, grandma went on a pilgrimage to train drifters starting out on their own pilgrimage, never to be heard from again. There'll be no one to take over the gym after mom, and she'll never have such a pilgrimage. Maybe if she has an exceptionally gifted pupil she connects with, but no one in the family anymore. Then there's dad and his garage. He always wanted to work together as father and daughter. I kinda spoiled that too. They don't seem to mind, they talk about how proud they are of me for chasing my dreams all the time, but that doesn't mean I don't feel a tinge of guilt over it." She sits down next to Oak and leans against her, snuggling into the crook of her neck. "Then I remember how happy and fulfilling my life is and the guilt eases. The troupe's become my life, and I couldn't be happier for it. I could've been happy taking over the gym, or working with my father in the garage my whole life, but I wouldn't be as

happy as I am now, in this moment, and every moment we spend together.” She gives a short laugh. “Besides, what would’ve Oak done? Get a job in Yama? Become a housewife? No, never in hell, I couldn’t bear to do either to her.”

Sequoia leans back on her hands, kicking her feet out, letting the warmth of the fire wash over her. “Whose idea was it to form the troupe, anyways?”

Oak lazily raises her hand. “Guilty. If it wasn’t for me, Lily probably would’ve taken over the gym or worked in the garage. Growing up, Lily and I would watch movies together, and when we were very small we’d act them out. In our own lil kid interpretation of them. From an early age, I realized I wanted to be an actor. Pretty common lil kid fantasy, right? Only, it stuck with me. As we got older, but still pretty small, I started reading actual plays, and Lily and I would start doing those for her folks. As we grew, so did my demands for our little plays, becoming more serious about them, rehearsing them with Lily for hours each week before actually performing them. We’ve always done our own weird take on traditional plays, but I still wanted it to be true to the source material. Lily was more relaxed about it. She tempered my desire for accuracy and legitimacy. If it wasn’t for her, I’d probably be a serious actor in a serious troupe like the Pomme Poivrée, or a career stage actor. Unbearable. What we do is far more fulfilling and interesting and pure to me than being part

of the institutional art culture. That's a profession, this is our life. That's the difference between outsider art and the stuff created by college educated, art culture minded people. They work jobs, we put on shows."

Sequoia lets that sink in. The true depth of their commitment to this lifestyle becomes clearer to Sequoia as she thinks about her own place in it. The gals rarely talk about their motives, only their actions and beliefs. She sees a foothold and takes it. "How about you, Hemlock? I get that there was *something* that happened to your village and you went all feral for a bit, but you were in training to be a blacksmith, right? How'd that turn into... this?"

Hemlock looks up at the stars for a long few moments. "I told you about how my village lived close to the nature of the environment. These two... they live close to the nature of people. Their true state, not the superficialness ingrained into you by society. I guess that kinda just clicked with me." She looks over at Lily and Oak cuddling together, lost in their own little world. "I just go with the flow, and things work out. I didn't have a lick of experience with anything approaching theatrical. But... I took to it quickly out of necessity, and now I can't imagine doing anything else. Life's brief, Coy. If you spend your time worrying about what you're 'supposed' to be doing or what you 'want' to do or where you 'fit in', you won't actually do anything and it'll all be over before you know it.

You just gotta find something that makes you happy, and do it. Everything else will fall into place. I fell into this by chance, but being with these two weirdos, putting on our goofy shows, once I stopped worrying about if this is what I wanted to do with my life and realized how happy I was, it became my life. Could I be doing something else? Would something else make me happier, feel more fulfilled? Who cares? 'What ifs' are just a thing society wants you to be obsessed over so you constantly grind away your life on worry, giving them an opportunity to pounce on you. Worriers are easy prey. Life ebbs and flows, no one matters even a little bit, we all just come in and out with the tide. Remember how you said it was sad some people are afraid of even getting their feet wet? Life's the same way. You're in the tide anyways, splash around, kick up mud, do what you want, who cares if a jellyfish stings you. No one comes out of this scot free. I let the tide take me, and I found how to have fun being tossed about by the waves. That's the purpose of this troupe, I think. To make you realize that you can be happy doing anything, absolutely anything at all no matter how weird or antithetical to society, so reduce yourself to your natural state and live emotionally with people who mean something to you. That's what our shows are really about. That's why we flop, bomb, tell jokes no one but us thinks are funny, and generally do whatever fool thing we think of. To make people realize the absurd society we all live in is just a facade, a poorly painted backdrop, and you can go off-script with your friends as much as you like and still be

happy. That's why I'm in the troupe. That's why I've made acting my life."

And just like that, it all finally clicks for Sequoia. The gals have been trying to show her all along, but she could never get the notion of being an outsider coming along for the ride out of her head. She may have agreed with their philosophies and views on the world, but to her it was simply agreeing with something that made sense. She may have thrown herself into the shows, but it felt like something she could do to make other people happy. All that is washed away, mud being pulled away from her feet by the receding tide and new mud being washed in by the swells as she fully buys into her new way of life. She's no longer agreeing with sensical outsider views of society, she's actively living them. The way she approaches shows shifts in her mind, becoming a way to have fun with your friends and make herself happy. She remembers something Lily said that first night, about the troupe being a family. Lily had included her in that, but she never allowed herself to feel it until now. She remembers helping the people of Raven's Gulch, and realizes it was out of love and not obligation that they threw themselves into the relief effort. She thinks of Lily talking about Sun Tea, and doing things out of love for others. The moments of intimacy and closeness with the others no longer feel like expressions of affection, but genuine love. The other three have been living genuinely and truly with her, but



she's been holding back this whole time and didn't even realize it.

She then realizes her feelings for Sunflower, why she tries so hard to get through to her. Why she even bothers to try at all, instead of just writing her off as a lost cause. It's not out of gratitude for saving the world she's come to love. It's not even out of pity for her self-imposed isolation. It's out of love for her, the true her, the part buried deep down beneath those layers of duty and obligation, the part that gave her a chance, the part that didn't want the sea serpent to suffer, the part that laughed at the guild wall, the part that made her put the world back as it was without exception. She realizes she wants to peel back all those layers and expose the vulnerable idiot in love deep inside so badly. All this comes crashing down in Sequoia's mind at once, the waves throwing down her reservations and fears. The actual time between what Hemlock said and now is less than a minute. She bunches her knees up to her chin, folds her arms over them, and buries her face in her arms. All she says is "Thank you" just barely loud enough to be heard, and she starts crying.

Lily and Oak take note, sitting straight up and looking at Sequoia with wide eyes. The past few minutes have been a real rollercoaster of emotions, from excitement to introspection to philosophy, but this is out of the blue. Lily gives Hemlock a weak smile. "See whatcha done now,

dummy? You broke her.” A laugh gurgles its way from Sequoia’s heaving shoulders.

Hemlock’s silent for a few moments, before building up to a big, roaring laugh. “I must’ve, because she didn’t even notice!”

Sequoia lifts her head. “Sniff... notice what?”

Hemlock’s laughter slows and she wipes a tear from her eye. “That I totally distracted you from trying to get the story of my village outta me.”

Sequoia just stares at Hemlock wide eyed before laughing herself. Her laughs mix with her sobs, sucking in air with a wet hic when she can, her head sinking back into her arms. “What can I say? I’m all choked up.”

“Pffft haha, goofball.” Oak sits behind Sequoia and wraps her arms around her, putting her head on the back of Sequoia’s. She rocks her gently, not saying anything else.

It takes a few minutes for Sequoia’s sobbing to stop. She lifts her head up and wipes her eyes and nose with her sleeve and shakes her head. “It’s ok. I’m ok now. I just... You ever have one of those moments where you’re just so happy, where you realize you’re so in love with everything, that you can’t help but cry? Cuz I just had my first brush with that feeling. Whatta rush. The whole reality of my brain changed in an instant and I didn’t even need the

universe's help. It was just like... pwah, epiphany. I can't believe how much I love the three of you. No, that's not it, I can't believe how much I love *us*. I'm just totally, fully, completely bought in and goofy in love with our shared life together."

Oak gives a short laugh, still clutching Sequoia. "I think she finally gets it, gals. Awkward getting to know each other phase officially over."

Lily strokes Sequoia's hair between her horns and shakes her head. "It took us a whole year to wear Hemlock down. We're getting good at this."

Hemlock just folds her arms and laughs. "That's because of my thick skull. Coy's a real softie. Paper thin skull bulging under all them brains."

Sequoia rubs her eyes. "This is gonna be the weirdest, most memorable Teufelnacht festival anyone's ever seen. I can't wait. We may not even get an applause."

Lily giggles. "I wouldn't be surprised. We're absolutely the worst. That's why we're gonna have so much fun together." She reaches down and takes Oak and Sequoia's hands and pulls them up to her. "Like tonight, for instance. I happen to know the perfect way to celebrate."

Sequoia sniffs and laughs. "Being able to perform at the festival or my finally getting it?"

“Being alive and together, dork. That’s all the reason we’ll ever need to celebrate.” Lily holds their hands as she walks backwards, gazing into their eyes, leading them back to the van where Hemlock’s already waiting for them. “Could you get that, Coy?” The campfire snuffs out, washing them in moonlight. They don’t give themselves the chance for their eyes to adjust.

## Chapter 16

Yama is one of the most developed cities on the continent. Far to the north and carved into the foothill of Mt. Suika, the tallest mountain in the Ichigo mountain range, which tears across the northeast of the continent like a keloid scar, it was the start of the mechanical revolution outside of Arclight. It’s one of less than a handful of cities on the continent with skyscrapers. Today, it’s the business center of the Windswept continent. Accounting firms, law firms, managing firms, companies’ headquarters, call centers, government buildings, jobs as vague as the papers they haul perpetually down the halls of the buildings between 9am and 5pm every day, all make their home in Yama. Downtown is filled with office buildings, food trucks, fast food places, restaurants whose sole purpose seems to be to offer happy hour specials, and of course, only the most luxurious in chain store shopping.

Due to its sprawl and level of activity, it also has the continent's best public transit system. People are able to come into downtown from the outlying areas easily through light rail, and buses comb the streets like ants gathering food.

When people say "Yama", this is usually what they think of. They don't think of the Nashi woods outside of town, where the gals are camping. They don't think of the sleepy neighborhoods greedily lapped up by the city that lay on the periphery of glass and concrete. The neighborhoods where artists gather to build community with one another, where amateur contact sports like wrestling and boxing thrive, where the grocery stores are small, locally owned buildings that grew from simple greengrocers, where locally run boutiques and thrift stores and restaurants cower in fear of being discovered by the hunger of the city's commerce. They don't think of the weird houses with weirder lawns that have never heard of something like a "homeowners association".

Some people may think of the expansive park in one of these neighborhoods that's home to the fairgrounds and a public use outdoor stage, but mostly because of the fairgrounds themselves. Most Brezitellans have heard of the fairgrounds, and vicariously, the stage there, but they wouldn't know that the stage is a communal stage for anyone who wants to apply for the space and time. Not that they'd care even if they did know. The small

managing firm that owns the stage and fairgrounds may have final say in who performs, but it's rare they exercise this control outside of festivals. The festivals are what keeps the firm in business, so it's the only time they truly care about who performs what. The spaces inbetween festivals feature any sort of production you can imagine, from one person interpretative dance, to community theater, town halls, even (rarely) local government debates.

And of course, the notoriously weird productions of three, now four altho no one but the theater manager knows that yet, losers from who knows where. No one really knows that this is where Lily and Oak grew up, they just know them as the drifters who come in every few months that put on shows that are at least never boring. This is the neighborhood they hang their posters in. The gals have rarely been downtown. They went once, to try hanging posters to attract the attention of workers in need of a distraction, but they ended up getting a citation for advertising without a permit. They haven't been back since.

The day before now, they went to the stage and talked to Briar, the theater manager. Lily gave her the list of planned shows and their accompanying posters, new ones Oak made during some downtime in Feymist now that they have a fourth member to advertise, and all of them posed for a photograph for the front of the flier for

the festival. Lily gave a few statements for the newspaper article, Lily handles the business side of things after all, and the gals walked around the neighborhood, hanging posters and showing Sequoia around. Sequoia can't help but compare it to Feymist. The neighborhood has its charm, but nothing like Penny District and the beach. Not that the others don't agree. She oohs and aahs at the weirder houses, like the one decorated in fishing and boating gear despite Yama being utterly land locked, or the one who brazenly displays street signs they've... appropriated from around town. They show her their favorite place to eat, a small wooden building called The Gnarled Root Diner, but they have to put off going there until some tips start coming in. It's stir fry that night. They pass by Birch's gym, a humble and undecorated building in the early 20th century tradition, but don't stop in, not wanting to disrupt any lessons that may be going on.

All that was yesterday, tho. Today, the van churns to a stop in a driveway that leads up to a large garage that looks like it was cobbled together from other, lesser garages. Lily definitely picked up bad habits from her father. The house attached to the garage is small. From the outside, you can guess it's probably two beds, one bath, and you'd feel very proud of yourself for being right. It has a simple brick exterior, a black shingle roof, and a simple six panel wooden exterior door with a cheap storm door over it. The lawn is unadorned with any... intentional decorations. A few vehicle parts sit atop cinder blocks and

wooden planks, grass puffing up around the sides of them. You get the impression the grass is overgrown because any attempt to mow it would be thwarted by a myriad of bolts and screws long since forgotten. More than anything, the house looks lived in. Sequoia takes an instant shine to the place. As they pile out of the van and head up the walk to the door, Lily shakes her head at the expanse of the garage laid across the lawn. She puts her hand on the handle for the storm door and looks behind her. "Now remember Coy. Don't let dad freak you out, he's harmless. Just don't react at all and he'll back off."

Sequoia laughs. "I dunno, Lil, what if I'm into it?"

Lily hangs her head and shakes it. "Then you'll be even more one of a kind than you are now. Maybe we'll get lucky and mom'll answer the door." Lily pulls the storm door open and knocks "shave and a haircut" on the door. A dog starts barking its fool head off next door, which goes largely ignored.

After a few moments, the door swings open and there stands... Lily. Or well, Lily if she was more than double her own age, a couple inches taller and let her hair go wild while still keeping it short. Birch wears a somewhat loose fitting white silk blouse with black buttons and trim, the sleeves long and the cuffs wide, and paper bag blue slacks cinched around her waist with a length of rope. Her outfit seems to have been selected for its freedom of movement rather than its fashion. When



she answers the door, Birch wears a totally blank, unreadable expression that immediately reminds Sequoia of Sunflower. However, once Birch sees who her company is, her eyes open slightly more and a small smile forms on her lips. "Ah, good morning, Lily and Oak. Hemlock, wonderful to see you as well. And this must be Sequoia. Oak has told me... well, as much as a five minute phone conversation could convey."

Sequoia reaches past Lily's shoulder and offers her hand. "Pleased to meetcha, Mrs. Dampsoil."

Birch takes her hand and shakes. Sequoia hasn't shaken many hands, but she still feels like this will be the strongest and firmest one she'll ever feel in her life. "It's just Birch, please." Birch opens the door wide and steps aside, sweeping her hand indoors. "Come in, take your shoes off, make yourself at home. I have tea on the stove." The gals step in and crowd the doorway as they remove their shoes and socks. Birch walks into the living room and sits in a simple brown recliner next to a blue cloth sofa. "Your father is in the garage, girls. He'll be out in a little bit." Sequoia looks around the living room and smiles. The outside of the house may be largely undecorated, but inside is warm and inviting. There's the usual things you expect, a tv and vcr on a table with some shelves of vhs's underneath it. Bookshelves filled with what else but books. There's a long shelf along the wall with photographs of Birch, Zevon, Lily, and a girl Lily's age with

mousy brown hair who Sequoia assumes to be Oak, along with some more recent photos, and homemade statuettes made out of metal. There's nature paintings framed simply in rough, raw wood with no glass on the wall that appear to be originals. There's also black and white photographs of scenes from villages and long since deserted country roads overrun with grass. You can clearly see into the kitchen from the entrance, and it has a worn wooden table with six chairs along it, and the usual, plain, outdated appliances, with a simple metal kettle on the stove. Every square inch of the fridge is covered in magnets and yellowed drawings of varying quality. Lily and Oak's art through the ages. The fridge instantly makes Sequoia think of the donation box. Birch may not have much sentimentality for objects, but it's obvious she has great sentiment for memories.

“Thanks mom, some tea sounds great.” The gals all pile on the couch, Oak and Sequoia reflexively curling their tails into their laps so no one accidentally sits on them.

It's funny, the recliner is definitely bigger than it needs to be for Birch, but she somehow manages to give the impression of filling it. “How did getting your ID go, Sequoia? We spoke to the Department of Information, but we never heard anything beyond that or received any paperwork.”

Sequoia leans forward slightly and smiles. "Oh, it went great. I'm friends with Sunflower Slipstream and she gave me a note vouching for my info, so after confirming my address with you they did... uhm... What was it? An overbite?"

Lily rolls her eyes. "Override."

"Right, an override and just accepted whatever I put down. I guess Sunflower has connections in high places?"

Birch's eyes get ever so slightly wider. "You know Sunflower? I have to say, that's even more surprising than your plane of origin."

Lily shakes her head. "Wait, hold up. Do *you* know Sunflower?"

Birch nods slightly. "Of course. I know many of this continent's warriors. We spar once a season."

Lily, Oak and Hemlock practically jump out of their seats. Lily leans forward and waves her arms. "What! Since when!"

Birch tilts her head and rolls her eyes up a bit. "Let's see... It must be seven years now. It was shortly after you left home. She had just attained S class in the Crossguards, and sought me out to... how did she put it... 'keep herself humble'."

Lily squints and pinches the bridge of her nose. “Mooooom! Why didn’t you ever tell us that! Up til like... a month ago, she’s been nothing but trouble for all of us! Showing up on Freelancing jobs to spoil it for us, harassing us whenever we were in Feymist for no reason, bullying us for performing!”

Birch shrugs. “It simply wasn’t something to concern you with. You left the warrior’s path to follow your own, so I didn’t think it was relevant. I haven’t told you of any of the other warriors that come to spar with me either. For all I knew, the three of you never interacted with her. Why would you? She’s in the most advanced class of the Crossguards and you’re civilians. You’ve certainly never brought up any confrontations with Sunflower. I would’ve had... “ and Birch’s expression hardens slightly for just a moment. “stern words for her if I had known. If you say ‘up til a month ago’, then it sounds like you resolved that without my help.”

Lily huffs and sits back on the couch and folds her arms. “Yeah, well, you can thank Coy for that one.”

“Coy?”

Sequoia nods. “That’s the nickname Lily gave me. Seh-coy-ah, get it?”

Birch shakes her head slightly. “Is Lily still doing that? I apologize, she can’t help it. Her father’s influence.”

Sequoia laughs. “It’s totally cool, I like it. It’s not as clever as getting Lily from Linden, but it’s real sweet to me. Oak was telling me a bit about your training pilgrimage.” Sequoia nods at the black and white photographs on the walls. “I take it those were taken on the road?”

“Yes. Each photograph is of a different place on my pilgrimage. I would find the one location, object, or person that filled me with the most emotion and perfectly encapsulated what that area meant to me, and took a photograph of them. I created the paintings as well. Each one is a visual representation of the emotion of a particular memory. This one, here.” and she points to a painting of a snow-capped mountain with a crystalline lake surrounded by trees, washed in moonlight. “No such sight exists on the continent that I’m aware of. Yet, that’s exactly the emotion a particularly engaging battle filled me with. I think of that battle, and I think of this scene. Emotions are the shape of memories. Concentrate deeply enough on those emotions and you’ll gain a clear image of that memory, even if it’s visually disconnected from the reality of that memory. Music is much the same way. When we play music emotionally, it connects with memory more deeply, and a particular song or tune will always remind you of the feelings you felt during that memory. Sounds create images in our minds from the emotions that the music brings forth. You may never have seen that image in your life, but you can picture it with

perfect clarity. That's the memory of that emotion. Then it's simply a matter of putting that to canvas."

"They're beautiful. The photographs too. Everything is just so raw and emotional and forces the viewer to examine their own feelings when they look at them. It's funny how people can look at the same thing and feel different things, y'know? I look at this painting of the mountain and I think of telling stories in front of a bonfire on the beach in Feymist. It's the way the moon shines on the lake, I think. What was it like, walking the continent like that?"

The smile on Birch's face widens, her eyes growing softer. "There is nothing on this Earth finer. Immersing yourself in the natural splendor of the continent, assisting villages with their problems, the fierceness of combat when you're living on the edge... It's something I think everyone should experience, one way or another. Knowing my girls are going around the continent having similar experiences, albeit with more pacifism, makes me endlessly happy."

Oak laughs nervously and Lily rubs the back of her neck. "Jeez ma, cut it out, that stuff's embarrassing." The sound of a heavy door opening and clicking closed comes from the kitchen, then the sound of heavy boots being dumped on the floor, followed by the slap of feet across tile coming towards the living room. Lily hangs her head. "Speaking of embarrassing."

A small, wiry man about Lily's size and build wearing oil-stained green coveralls stops in the doorway of the kitchen, rubbing his glasses with the clean spot of a mostly dirty rag. His short, pale blonde hair splays out to all sides, like it's trying to escape its owner, and his long, pointed goatee curls up slightly at the end. He coughs and shakes his head. "Cecilia have *mercy* on that machine. Shocks shot, timing belt torn, wheels worn, axel axed, brakes broken, catalytic converter kakked, fan fragged... Bob won't like the bill." He puts on his glasses and walks over to the wooden rocking chair across from Birch's recliner, plopping himself down heavily, swinging it heavily backwards. Oak grips her tail a little tighter. Sequoia gets the impression that Zevon doesn't sit on cloth furniture often after coming from the garage. As the chair swings forward, he stops it with his feet, and pushes his glasses further up his nose, seemingly noticing the gals on the couch for the first time. "Ho ho, what's this?"

Lily rolls her eyes. "Here it comes. Brace yourself, Coy."

If Zevon heard her, he pretends not to have. He looks across the room at Birch, grinning madly. "Honey, you said she was from Hell, not cute as hell!"

Birch shrugs. "How could I know? Oak didn't have time to describe her on the phone. You're meeting her for the first time, same as I."

Sequoia laughs. “The gals weren’t fooling. Hiya, Mr. Dampsoil, the name’s Sequoia, Coy for short.”

“Pffft, ‘Mr. Dampsoil’, call me Zevon, sweetheart.”

Sequoia grins smugly. “Ok, Zevon Sweetheart.”

Zevon laughs. “My girls sure know how to pick ‘em!” The kettle whistles from the kitchen and Birch goes to get up, but Zevon motions for her to sit down. “I got it, dear.” He kisses her on the cheek as he passes her on the way to the kitchen. Zevon shouts from the kitchen as he prepares six mugs on a tray with the kettle. “So! The girls have finally taken on another member, eh? How has your journey been so far?” He walks into the living room and sets out the tray, pouring a mug for each person and putting them on coasters on the coffee table in front of the gals, and on the small side table next to Birch’s recliner. He grips his own mug to him as he climbs back into his rocking chair.

“I love it. I’ve never felt so alive. Lily’s a joy to be with and Oak’s very dear to me.” Sequoia shrugs. “Hemlock I could take or leave.” Hemlock playfully bops Sequoia between her horns. “We did a month in Feymist, three days in Plankspire, a weekend in Deuter, three *hard* but rewarding days in Raven’s Gulch, and stopped by Harmony on the way up. I’m absolutely loving every moment up here, immersing myself in the culture and nature of the world and its people.”



Zevon runs his eyes up and down Sequoia, examining her, as if he never really believed she was a demon until this moment. "Is this... a brief tour, or for keeps?"

Sequoia looks down into her tea and smiles warmly. "For keeps if we have anything to say about it. Topside is endlessly beautiful and amazing, and the gals give me happiness I never dreamed of."

Lily puts on her teasing face and tugs at Sequoia's cheek. "Awwwww Coy Coy!" Sequoia struggles, threatening to spill her tea, and Lily lets her cheek snap back. "Hehe. You don't have to be all stiff around my parents, Coy, you can talk like you normally do."

Sequoia laughs. "I'm just speaking from the heart, is all. I get all sappy about topside, get used to it."

Birch leans forward in her chair, folding her hands in front of her, her elbows on her knees. Sequoia gets the impression that Birch has been aching for this topic to come about, but has been too polite to bring it up herself. "Is 'topside' the demonic term for this plane of existence?"

Sequoia's a bit taken aback by that. She settles back into the couch and nods. "Yep. Sounds like you already know about the planar system. Saves me the trouble of having to explain about how Hell is a lower dimension and all that."

Birch smiles a little wider. “It’s taught at the monastery if you advance far enough on your path to enlightenment. It’s not popular with Cecilian beliefs, but one I’ve always believed in nonetheless.”

Lily frowns and goes to fold her arms before realizing they’re already folded. “If you two are gonna talk about... supernatural stuff, I’m gonna ask dad about the vehicle he’s working on.”

Hemlock and Oak whip their heads towards Lily and shout “NO!” in one combined voice.

Birch settles back into her chair. “There’s no need to be rude, Lily. I’m merely curious about Sequoia’s origins.” She turns to Sequoia, her face an unreadable blank. “Please note, Sequoia, that I have a very open mind, and despite living in a monastery dedicated to Cecilia for a decade, I have no qualms with you being a demon. All people are as one, indistinguishable from another, and demons are just another type of person.”

Sequoia shrugs. “I wasn’t worried. Oak was telling me how cool the two of you are about weird people like her and I. I figure you could relate, being an ex-monk martial artist married to a mechanic.”

Zevon laughs. “I dare say the two worlds are more distant than Earth and Hell. Did Lily tell you the story about that?”

“Close, Oak did.”

Birch folds her hands in her lap. “I hope bringing up Cecilia isn’t a painful subject for you.”

Sequoia shakes her head. “Not at all. I may have problems with her, obviously, but it’s interesting debating her nature and role in history. I have no problem with topsiders worshipping her.”

Birch shakes her head. “Neither of us worship Cecilia, but that’s a very enlightened approach to have, given your position.” Birch leans forward again, “Have the demons sought out other planes since their exile? Like the theorized nearby plane of chaos wh-”

Lily turns to her father and raises her voice above her mom’s. “So dad, about that catalytic converter-”

Birch sighs loudly. “Since Lily is put off by... subjects of this nature, what part of the act have you most enjoyed performing?”

Sequoia waves her hands in front of her aimlessly for a second. “If I’m being honest, it’s the play we made out of my creator’s story about the Reveal. Plus I have tons of fun with the stuff the raffle winners bring in. It feels... so creative and expressive, looking at a pile of junk and seeing the object it could be. Like this guy who brought in wood, metal, and string. I made it into a violin, that was one of my favorites.”

Birch and Zevon look at each other for a long few moments. Zevon smiles broadly. “It sounds like you girls have been busy the past six weeks. Everything you’ve said is news to us. What’s this business about a raffle?”

Sequoia’s eyes grow as wide as her smile. “Oh man, it’s great. So like, we hand out raffle tickets before a show, and then we draw the winner at the end. Then we ask the winner to come back the next show with random raw materials they find lying around and I can make them into something in nearly an instant. Like that violin, or when I made a third mattress in the van from a metal ingot, a bag of cotton, and a bolt of canvas. Not that we use it much except as a table or a place to toss our laundry, mind you, I always just sleep with Lily and Oak in our bed.”

Oak laughs nervously, and Lily shakes her head, her face red. “They don’t need to hear about that, Coy.”

Zevon laughs, and Birch clears her throat. “So, what play are you girls putting on tonight?”

Oak’s ears perk up and she smiles wide. “The Red Octopus, our favorite Capsaicin play. As always, Hemlock’s playing Cap’n Capsaicin. I’ll be playing his first mate, Jolokia, Lily’s playing Admiral Piiman of the Coalition Navy, and Coy’s mainly sfx with some scenes as random pirates and naval officers. For the octopus scene, we’re gonna have Coy animate the octopus costume rather than have Lily and I inside of it. Should make for a more dynamic

scene, having Capsaicin and Piiman fight the octopus at the same time like they do in the actual story.”

Birch tilts her head. “Animate the octopus costume? Have you girls been dabbling in animatronics?”

Sequoia grins widely. “I don’t even know what you just said. I just... make it move. My first play was the Thief and the Throne and we were able to have Rafflesia and Wolfred in the same scene by having me animate the Wolfred costume and generate Hemlock’s voice from within the costume. I’m not the sfx guru for nothing. If you think it, even if you think it’s impossible, I can probably do it. So long as it doesn’t mess with people’s forms, I’m not willing to test my abilities that far. Altho,” and Sequoia laughs, “I need to have a big meal, lotsa coffee, and be prepared for whatever weird random backlash happens from it. Usually it doesn’t interfere with the play, but one time I created ocean spray for a boat scene in a Capsaicin play and the backlash created a real wave that crashed over the front three rows. You shoulda seen the look on their faces.”

Birch’s eyes grow genuinely wide. “Fascinating. The abbots weren’t wrong.”

Sequoia tilts her head. “How do you mean?”

Birch folds her hands and rests her chin on them, looking directly into Sequoia’s eyes. “At the monastery, we were taught that the demons were a manifestation of the

natural chaos of the universe. The demons weren't evil, but weren't divine either. Unlike Cecilia, who could do as she wished freely, the demons paid a price for manipulating reality, much like how all things in this world must have a cost. Cecilia was the balancing weight to the demons. The demons from a lower plane and Cecilia in the higher plane, with our plane in the middle, the fulcrum of the struggle between the demons and Cecilia. The demons became too powerful on Earth, and so a being from the higher dimension, Cecilia, was brought forth by nature to balance the weight. Only Cecilia went too far and tilted the scales completely to her side. To maintain balance, Cecilia disappeared from our plane, to ensure the demons didn't return, preventing another war."

Sequoia leans forward, her eyes matching Birch's. "So your sect says that backlash and hunger have always been the cost of demons' abilities?"

Birch nods. "Not in those exact terms, but yes. It's how we know they were from nature, like the sun in the sky or the water under our feet, and unlike Cecilia, who was... alien. Have you been told differently?"

Sequoia makes the so-so hand gesture and tilts her head. "Well not directly, it might be a lie of omission. My creator claims that we were like Cecilia, changing reality freely. They may have just left out the part about backlash and hunger because it didn't make for a good story." Sequoia averts her gaze. "So uhm, you said you don't

worship Cecilia. Do you believe she was a goddess who created everything under, over, and upon the Earth?"

Birch and Zevon look at each other for a long few moments. Zevon shrugs. "I mean, I *know* she was, but that's not the same as believing, is it? I'm pretty ambivalent about it. It doesn't make a difference one way or another to me, I just use phrases like 'Cecilia have mercy' or 'Goddess help me' and such because it's such a ubiquitous part of our culture. Like Birch said, we don't attend any services or worship in any way. Whether or not she *actually* did doesn't have much of a bearing on my life." He laughs. "Certainly she doesn't answer when I ask her to get some damned machine started."

Birch is silent for a few moments more, her chin still resting on her folded hands. She gazes off in the distance, not focusing her vision on anything. "...I don't think so. Certainly the fact that I had no choice in knowing she was is an indication that she wasn't. What purpose is there in making everyone know you made everything and that you're god, but not anything else? No edicts, no commandments, not even so much as ideas about how one should live their life or worship her. It's... not something I believe a god would do. Gods demand worship, but Cecilia simply requires we know about her. Isn't that strange? A being who demands we know that she's god but doesn't care if we worship her or not? Or is it simply that she thought making everyone know about her

would mean we'd all worship her? But how could we without direction? Did she simply not care how we worshipped, so long as we did? I can't believe a being with the kind of ego that drives her to fill every mind with the knowledge she's god wouldn't care how she's worshipped. Cecilia can't be a god of primal force because of the Knowledge. She can't be a god of vast intelligence and design either, because she left us with essentially nothing but her ego. It's... rather petty. Nothing about her makes any amount of sense, both logically and metaphysically. It's a small part of the reason I departed the monastery in favor of my pilgrimage. I believe she was just that, a being from a higher dimension, much like the gods before her were from a higher dimension. I don't believe the world was willed into existence. I subscribe to the belief that it's a random but inevitable fluke of nature's chaotic experimentation. Everything is ever changing, all driven by nature's desire to create new life. The only static thing that exists is the cycle of life and death that sustains the universe. The Knowledge exists simply to turn the world against her enemies. The demons' failure was not their hubris, but their lack of hubris. They never claimed to be gods, and so never were venerated like gods. They were tricksters, so naturally the people of the world sided with Cecilia, who put an end to their trickery."

Sequoia grins. "History's written by the victors, after all."



Birch snaps out of it, and sits back and smiles softly at Sequoia. “Exactly right. For events like the Arclight war, which is relatively recent, we have excellent records of the events so we have a less... influenced perspective on it, but for things like the Reveal, which happened so many millennia ago... we have only the barest of records to go by, and their objectivity is unquestionably poor.”

Sequoia shakes her head. “You two are so much like Lily, it’s crazy.”

Zevon and Birch both smile at that. “She has all the best of Zevon and I with few of the flaws. We’re very proud of her.”

Lily turns even redder. “Moooom...” Hemlock snickers and ruffles Lily’s hair.

Birch’s reservations about her curiosity are totally gone. “Tell me about your people, Sequoia. I want to know what your home and people are like.”

“Well...” Sequoia turns to Lily. “That’s the first night we’re doing my creator’s story, right?”

Lily nods. “Yep. It’s a good way to kick it off. Hehe. Who wants to break the news?”

Hemlock crosses her arms. “It’s all you, girly. You made it happen.”

Lily rubs her hands together and hunches her shoulders, leaning in like she was telling a secret. “If you wanna hear about that stuff... Come to the first night of the Teufelnacht festival.”

Zevon rocks in his chair, stroking his goatee. “Whyzzat?”

“Hehe. Because we’re performing each day of the festival this year instead of the Pomme Poivrée. Our first show is gonna be the story of the demons during the Reveal, from the perspective of Coy’s creator, a demon who was actually there and talked to Cecilia.”

Zevon rocks so far forward that he nearly flings himself out of the chair. He sputters for a few seconds, trying to find the right words. He gives up and just lets it flow from his heart, beaming with pride. “That’s... that’s incredible! Unbelievable! The three of you... four of you... performing at Teufelnacht?! That’s been your dream for years! Imagine that! My Lily and Oak! Performing at Teufelnacht! And... and you’re telling a story by an ancient demon?! I just... what!”

Lily wraps her arms around Oak and Sequoia’s necks and laughs. “I told you he’d flip!”

Birch may not have had a look of shock on her face so strongly in her entire life. Her normal stoic composure cracks ever so slightly, and she leans forward in her recliner, a grin spreading slowly across her face. “This is

going to be quite the Teufelnacht indeed. I'm most looking forward to hearing this story. The time between now and then will be agonizing, but I wouldn't want to hear the story any other way than through your performance. Congratulations, girls. You've worked hard over the years to earn this opportunity. I'm so, so proud."

Lily nudges Oak with her elbow. "You should keep the hits coming, girly."

Oak's smile grows nervous and she fiddles with her tail. "Oh yeah. Haha, I was hoping you'd have forgotten about that. So uhm." She looks between Birch and Zevon and settles on looking at Birch. "I'm visiting Ficus and Stephen sometime during this tour. I'd like you two to be there when I see them. Uhm. If that's ok."

Birch settles back in her chair, her composure returned, but only barely. "Oh my. Today is full of surprises. Of course we don't mind. I'm certain I can restrain both of them with minimal damage, if that's what you prefer."

"N-not like that. Just emotional support. Just you two and Lily. A family thing, y'know?"

Zevon rocks thoughtfully in his chair. "What brought this on, Oak? You haven't seen them in ages."

"They wrote me a letter asking me to. I'm too nervous to call them and set up a day, but I wanted to work that

out with you two first anyways. Besides, it's not like they'd recognize my voice anyways.”

Zevon strokes his goatee. “I’ve got to zombify Bob’s car before the weekend... How about three nights from now? We can invite them here and have dinner here. That way you’re somewhere where you feel safe but still have privacy. We still have their number in our address book, assuming they never changed it.”

“Yep, same number it’s always been.”

“Then don’tcha worry none, we’ll set everything up.”

Oak lets out all her breath and smiles wide. “Thanks dad, I owe you. So how’s the gym been doing these days, mom?”

Birch shakes her head. “It’s been slow these days, dear. Students just aren’t coming in like they used to. I suspect my reputation has been working against me. We’ve mainly been relying on Zevon’s skills these days to get by. The students I do have are slow developers.” She sighs. “I have a great amount of patience, but I do wish they’d put up more of a challenge. Just about the only time I get to stop holding back completely is when Sunflower stops by.”

Sequoia gets a melancholy look on her face. “Uhm, she hasn’t stopped by for this season yet, has she?”

“No, not yet. I never know when she’ll show up, she simply does. She’s a capricious girl.”

“You can say that again. I wouldn’t be sitting here speaking to you if she wasn’t.”

Birch tilts her head. “How do you mean?”

“The first time I met her, she was bullying around the gals then flipped out when she saw me and came after me with her sword drawn. But after pranking her pretty hard, and giving her a sappy speech, she mellowed out and decided to not kill me even tho she totally was gonna only like... ten minutes prior.”

Birch’s eyes harden, and she grips the arm rests of her recliner tightly. “I’m going to have... very, very stern words for her the next time she comes up.”

Sequoia shakes her head. “Ah, it’s fine, we worked it out. We’re good friends now. I don’t blame her, I get how topsiders see me, and she especially has a reason to be paranoid about me.”

“Has she told you about what happened ten years ago in Rainsoaked?”

“No, she said it was all classified. She only confirmed that it did indeed happen the way the papers said. Mostly.”

Birch shakes her head and puts her chin on her folded hands once again. "That girl... Would you like to hear about it?"

Sequoia's eyes go wide. "You know what happened?"

Birch nods. "I do. She's told me this after many sparring sessions. Her first assignment as a Crossguard was to investigate the mayor of Roan for fraud, and in doing so, she uncovered a conspiracy that involved the cult of an entity known as Erakis. A being banished to a far flung plane of existence, it devoured energy, both arcane and mundane, to empower itself. This cult worshipped it as a god, and tried to bring it into this reality so it could reshape it into a plane where it could be onto a god. Every planet is a living being. Everything, from the smallest grain of sand to the largest animal is alive and has energy. It's fortunate for us the cult lacked this wisdom, but they did know about the power of belief. People give life to countries from the sheer belief that these countries exist. It was this belief and the energy of living countries that was being sacrificed to Erakis, with targeted countries becoming vast, incomprehensible holes in our world. Due to her involvement in the case, and her skill, Sunflower and a handful of other Crossguards were assigned the responsibility of stopping the cult. From what I understand, the cult succeeded in bringing forth a sort of embryonic form of Erakis onto this plane, and Sunflower destroyed it while her compatriots handled the cult. It was

then that Sunflower took it upon herself to reshape the world using the cult's rituals to return it to its natural state."

Sequoia's head droops, and she shakes it sadly. "That's... extremely heavy. How could they put the burden on one person like that? Why only send a few Crossguards instead of platoons of armed forces?"

Birch shakes her head. "They would've been more fuel for the beast. A small task force would be more effective, due to its mobility and adaptability."

Sequoia casts her eyes down. "It's so sad. She's so messed up from that to this day, thinking that she has to be ready for whatever the next big threat is, if there even will be one. She can't let herself relax and just... live her life. It's unfair to put that kind of burden on one person. There had to have been another way."

"Regardless, that's the reality of what happened. All we can do is have the wisdom to accept that. It's never too late for anyone, Sequoia. If it means that much to you, work within the present instead of dwelling on the past. The future will forever be unwritten."

Sequoia's head picks up and she smiles. "Thanks Birch, I'll keep that in mind. I'll find a way to snap her out of it and bring her back down to Earth."

Lily laughs. "It's cute how bad you've got it for her."

Sequoia smiles warmly. "Yeah, not gonna deny it."

Lily wilts a bit. "Aw, now it's no fun."

Hemlock leans forward and turns to Zevon. "How's the wrenching, old timer? Need anything hauled around or held up?"

Zevon uncurls his goatee, which simply curls right back up. "Good, always busy... Hm, maybe... The engine might be beyond even you. That's what the chains and pulleys are for anyways..."

Birch folds her arms. "I could use a sparring partner, Hemlock. It's been ages since you and I last battled. I'd like to see how far you've come. You may even use your axe, if you'd like."

Hemlock waves her hands defensively in front of her. "I-I'm gonna have to take a raincheck on that one, Birch. Don't wanna go on stage with a black eye and missing teeth."

"How about if I hit below the neck? That gives you two distinct advantages against me."

"M-maybe another time. Before this tour's over, promise."

Birch pinches her chin between her forefinger and thumb, tilts her head, and looks up before nodding. "Deal."



Zevon breathes a sigh of relief. “Phew. I was worried you were gonna break that beautiful face of hers before I got the chance to see her in that pirate outfit.”

If Hemlock’s face could get red, she’d be giving Sequoia a run for her money. “H-hey, come on now...” Hemlock clears her throat and folds her arms. “So, uhm, what did Bob do to fuck up his car this time?”

“You know those big metal bars that rise out of the ground for government buildings? The ones meant to prevent cars from going through?”

Lily leans forward, her hands on her knees. “Wait, did Bob actually hit those?”

Zevon shakes his head. “Worse, he drove over them at 15mph as they were rising.”

Lily falls back into the couch laughing. “Wait, doesn’t he *work* for the Department of Agriculture? How on Earth did he manage that?”

“Apparently, he thought he could just follow behind the person who went in ahead of him.”

Hemlock laughs. “Classic Bob. Do you think you’ve got time to take a look at the van? It’s been making a loud clunking sound under the hood since Harmony but Lily hasn’t figured it out.”

“I was wondering why you drove the van up instead of taking the bus. Sure, I can take a look, just so long as I don’t have to mess around with the interior. That still gives me a headache.”

“Haha, no problems there. Thanks, old timer.”

Sequoia turns to Zevon. “So how did you fall into the mechanic biz, Zevon? Was it passed down to you by your parents, like Birch’s gym?”

Zevon shakes his head. “No, nothing like that. I’ve always had a knack for machines. Used to drive my parents crazy, taking apart our electronics and seeing how they worked. I never saw my father so furious as when I had the family car’s engine dismantled into small pieces in the garage!” He nods over to a bookshelf. “Most people read novels and history books, but I read manuals and books on machinery. Anything that’s not a book on machinery is Birch’s. Wrenching is the only thing that ever made sense to me. Completely self taught, but I bet I could stand wrench to wrench with any other greasemonkey on the continent! Taught Lily as much as I could teach her before she left home. Birch and I may be very different, but we’ve at least got those two things in common. Besides being drop dead sexy, that is.” Zevon pushes himself up by his knees and stretches his back. “Well, I should get back to it. How about you give me a hand, Lily and Lock? I could use the extra brain and the extra muscle.”

Hemlock gets up and slips her coat off. "Wouldn't miss it for the world, old timer."

Birch eases herself out of her recliner and cracks her knuckles. "And Oak and Sequoia, you can help me with lunch."

Sequoia grins up at her. "More like you wanna hear more about Hell and Cecilia without Lily's interference."

Birch shrugs. "Of course, that's a given. Oak and I have had stirring conversations about Cecilia and the demons, but we've always lacked a more intimate perspective."

"You gotchyerself a deal, Birch. Y'know, I've never had a home-cooked meal at a table, just meals in front of a campfire or at taverns." Sequoia gets up and grabs Oak by the hands, pulling her up to her. They follow Birch into the kitchen, their tails curling around each other behind them.

Birch keeps facing into the kitchen. "Then you're in for a treat. You can chop the vegetables and tell me your intentions towards my girls."

Oak and Sequoia's eyes go wide and they look at each other before both laughing nervously. "You don't miss a beat, do you Birch?"

Oak shakes her head. "She'll give you a run for your money in laser focused attention spans. Should've known she wouldn't have missed that."

Sequoia puts her hands behind her head. “Well, you did say you have a very open mind...”

## Chapter 17

Three days later. Doomsday. Oak has been spending the past ten minutes muttering about all the things she can detect with her senses and snapping a rubber band on her wrist, with Lily massaging her shoulders. Hemlock and Sequoia sit around the fire, a somewhat worried expression on their faces. Lily looks up from her work and gazes at the other two. “You two gonna be alright without us for awhile?”

Hemlock puts the back of her hand to her forehead and sways unsteadily. “Oh no. Whatever are we to do.”

Lily laughs. “Curl up and die, I suppose. Gonna need a *big* shovel to put you under. At least you and Coy will fit in the same grave.” A pair of headlights pull up to the campsite and a horn sounds. Lily looks down at Oak and kisses her on the cheek. “That’s our cue. You ready, babe?”

Oak just gurgles for a moment. She shakes her head and takes a deep breath. “No. Yeah. Let’s just get this over with.” She gets up and slaps her cheeks as if trying to wake herself up. “Showtime.”

Hemlock gets up and puts her hand on Oak's shoulder. "Remember, you're in control and take deep breaths. You can let it all out afterwards."

Oak looks up at her and gives a weak smile. "Ok, but you asked for it." She holds Lily's hand tightly as she heads towards Zevon's car. "See you gals later tonight." Lily and Oak climb into the car's back seat, and it slowly rolls out into the night.

Hemlock and Sequoia look at the car's tail lights disappear as it pulls onto the road proper. Hemlock wraps her arm around Sequoia's shoulder. "Well, it's just us tonight, Coy. So how 'bout it? I get dinner tonight, give you a break from cooking for once?"

Sequoia stretches. "Yeah, I'd appreciate that, honestly. I'd love to taste some of your cooking for once. What's for dinner?"

"Just a simple stew. It's all I ever learned to cook."

Sequoia nods. "Mind if I grab a shower while you get that going? I haven't had one since before the show yesterday and feel a bit grody."

Hemlock folds her arms and grins. "Aw, I was hoping to use your stink to flavor the stew."

"Haha, gross." Sequoia stands up on her toes and pecks Hemlock on the cheek. "Thanks for getting that going, Lock. See ya soon." And she heads into the van.

It doesn't take long before Sequoia is leaving the van, rubbing her hair with a towel. She steps out into the night air, the slight chill making her shiver as it hits the wet spots on her neck and face. "Man, that stew smells gr-" She stops dead in her tracks, towel in mid rub. She looks around her, and all over every tree, the side of the van, on the ground laid out in a spiral radiating out from the fire, even hanging off the frame the cooking pot is hooked to are slips of paper with meaningless, random looking lines.

Hemlock's wearing her coat and she approaches Sequoia with a sweater covered in rough, sewn on patches with meaningless patterns on them. Hemlock holds it out to Sequoia. "Here, to keep the chill off you as you dry." She gets a look on her face that reminds Sequoia of that first night, when Hemlock used her coat to test to see if she was a monster. "You really, really should wear this. To keep from getting a cold."

Wordlessly, Sequoia slips it on over her flannel and tosses the towel back into the van carelessly, then takes a seat in front of the fire, facing the van, being careful to not sit on any of the papers. Hemlock sits opposite of her, looking at her seriously for a long few moments. "Lock, what's... what's going on?"

Hemlock idly tosses a stick into the fire. The tone to Hemlock's voice is odd, as if she's been practicing what she wants to say. "Y'know something, Coy? I love a lotta things about you. After all this obviously, right? It ain't just

your personality and brains and everything, but...”

Hemlock lowers her voice, deepens it, makes it more even and measured. “It’s the way we get each other. It’s the way we only use nicknames with each other like Coy and Lock. We never say our full names. We’re very careful about that.” Her voice returns to her usual cadence. Well, sort of. “We also get subtext and can read between the lines. Even if we fuck up what we’re trying to say, we get what the other’s saying.”

Sequoia shakes her head. “Lock, what’re you sa-”

Hemlock folds her arms in front of her. “So hey, Coy. What *did* that old crow tell you when they sent you up here, anyways.”

Sequoia reels backwards, her eyes and mouth wide with shock. She looks all around her at the meaningless scribbles and patterns, then back at Hemlock. Her gaze hardens, grows more firm than any of the gals have seen her before. “Just how hidden are you from her, Lock.”

Hemlock laughs to herself softly. “Hm... Y’know... I never did tell you how I got to be so feral all them years ago. Been eating away at you this whole time, hasn’t it?”

“Don’t change the subject.”

Hemlock shrugs. “I know lotsa great stories. Another thing I love about the rapport we have is that we trust each other, and really care about each other. We’re pretty

careful to not slip up.” She makes a kissy face at Sequoia. “We’re both such sensitive souls. I dunno about me, but you’re very kind and sweet. An awful lil shit sometimes, but I can forgive you for that. What I’m trying to say is, no matter what we say to each other, anything can be forgiven, and that we love each other deep down. Just like we love Lily and Oak, and even Sunflower. Keep that in mind.”

Sequoia keeps staring into Hemlock’s eyes. More than a minute of silence passes between them, neither backing down. Finally, Sequoia breaks the gaze and looks into the fire, then darts her eyes around to all the weird symbols scrawled on the papers surrounding her. Her face softens to her usual neutral expression, and she smiles up at Hemlock. “I’d love to hear one of your best stories. I know you’re holding out on me dude.”

Hemlock rubs her chin. “Well... Ok. I think you’re finally ready to hear my *best* one.” She grunts as she stands up, then moves over to the van, her shadow cast large against it by the fire. “You’ll forgive me if it’s not something cool like grabbing fire and twisting it like dough, but who knows? I may impress you.” She holds her hands up, creating a shadow puppet of a rough head with sharp ears. Well. As close as you can with just your hands, anyways.

“There was once an orc who was a real weird goofball. His name ain’t important, nothing has a name or else we



wouldn't give anything names, but for the sake of the story let's call him... Wolan. Y'see, Wolan lived in a village out in the north, near the Arclight border, just barely not in the middle of the woods. Everyone there had purpose. Meaning to their lives. They had a task that they did, and did it well. You could be a blacksmith," and Hemlock does her best to form an anvil with her hands. It's not bad, she's definitely a practiced hand.

"Or a hunter," and she forms a bow, flicking her finger to mimic an arrow shooting out of it and makes a "pyew" sound. Sequoia giggles.

"Or a warrior," and she forms a battle axe with her hands. "Or a lot of different things. But Y'see, that wasn't really for Wolan. Like I said, he was a real odd duck. Purpose and meaning... he didn't really believe in either, so he never wanted to learn *one* thing. He wanted to learn *everything* in the village, and more. He would read books, but... he just couldn't visualize the instructions in them. He couldn't learn how to do any of that stuff from books." She forms a shadow puppet of a person and makes their shoulders shrug.

"So he learned through mimicry instead. He would watch everyone work, and when they were in bed, he'd try to mimic what they did. And y'know what? It worked for him. He could *get* what they were doing. 'Course he still needed to practice a whole lot, but point is, he started to become skilled in all the trades of the village. He was well

liked by everyone, because he always made himself useful. He settled on being a blacksmith, the village's laws said he had to settle on *something*, but he could help with *anything*. But... y'know... He was a weirdo. The only thing he *could* learn from books was poetry, prose, and history. He'd go to bed with an open book for a pillow, and he was a drooler. They say if you sleep on a book, you'll absorb that knowledge, and Wolan was a big believer in it. Wolan was a dreamer, but also a big believer. In everything, every thought that came into his head from those books. But that drooling... It destroyed a ton of his books. Made the ink all runny." and she forms a big splotchy mess with her hands.

"One time he woke up in the middle of the night, words stuck to his cheek, and looked down at the latest book he ruined. When he looked down at it, he reeled in horror. Right there in front of him, by some freak coincidence, everything's a coincidence honestly, his drool made the ink run in such a way that it revealed to him... the *knowledge* and *logic* of the runes and traditions passed on to every son by their father." Hemlock struggles for a second, finally forming a crude shadow of a bonfire against the van.

"How was this possible? They had no logic, no meaning, meaning is a delusion! But there it was, in black and white and drool, and he *knew* it was true. His mind racing, terrified of the implications, he ran to the bonfire

some of the hunters were cooking their game on, and hurled the book into the fire.” She spreads her hands, making the bonfire burst, and then brings her hands together to form a shapeless lump.

“Clutching his old hunting axe, ready to do what had to be done if anyone tried to pull the book from the fire, he watched until every last bit of it was ash. Nameless. Formless. Of course, he didn’t need to worry so much. If anyone did something weird, it was Wolan doing it, and if Wolan was doing anything, it was weird. The hunters paid him no mind. I guess all that learning everything from just studying it messed with his brain cuz as he stood there, gazing into the fire at the ruin of the scariest possible thing to so many people’s way of life scattering in the wind, he had...” Hemlock fiddles her hands in the light of the fire, and seems to be struggling.

“He had...” she struggles more, frowning. “How do I form this damn shape again...” Sequoia giggles. That’s Hemlock’s cue. “Oh right. I remember. Ahem. He had... an epiphany!” and she spreads her hands wide, separating them, but the shadow against the van... it doesn’t follow her hands. Cast there on the side of the van is the sharp, vivid, photorealistic silhouette of a specific orc’s head, with translucent, wavy lines flowing into its ears. Sequoia nearly falls over backwards, only catching herself by her hands, shock writ large on her face.

“It wasn’t knowledge, it wasn’t belief, it was something utterly new and radical. An idea! One no one had thought of in all the millennia before him! He knew the beliefs and traditions of his tribe, and he realized... No one ever said that their son had to be *biologically* their son, nor even male specifically. It could be *anyone*, so long as they had that bond and that they’d *believe* in the face of knowledge. And Wolan, being the weird dude he was, kept thinking, and thinking, and realized that he now knew how to strengthen the belief to where it was back before the Reveal! No, even stronger! He rushed to the elder,” Hemlock wiggles her fingers, and the shadow morphs into an impossibly detailed silhouette of a specific looking orc running on solid ground.

“And explained to him his idea, to adopt children from all over, raise them as lovingly as their own, and when they grew of age, send ‘em out into the world! If they weren’t orcs, then they could hide easily amongst anything anywhere!” She turns her wrists, and the shadow shifts to form a bunch of huts with people scattering out of them like ants.

“Imagine the stars. Imagine how noticeable they are if they’re all clustered in one spot. How big of a target they are! But look up at the stars now and what do you see? Tiny pinpoints of light, all indistinguishable from another. It’s only when they bunch together into constellations that anyone notices them. The elder, being the wise man

he was, put this plan into action, and y'know what? That weird ol' dude was totally right. People all over still *knew*, but they started *disbelieving*! The belief was getting stronger! Stronger than it had been since before the oldest sequoia's great-great-grandparent was but a seed cone on the breeze!" and she closes her fists, the shadows reshaping into a seed cone bursting open and scattering tiny seeds that float on the wind.

"And 'you know who', *that* old gal, she couldn't spot the believers! They were too diffuse, too spread out, too... alien for her rigid mind. Without being orcs, without bunching up into constellations, how was she to ever recognize any of them? All them orphans they took in, they became wanderers, or tradesmen, or storytellers, or anything they wanted, anywhere they wanted! They passed down those beliefs and traditions to their sons, it has to be sons y'see, and those sons passed them down to their sons! Belief... started overcoming knowledge, yet stayed hidden! And because that belief forbade writing anything down, no one they didn't want to know would ever suspect! That old coot really had a great idea. But y'see..." She opens her hands again, and wrings her hands together. Depicted on the side of the van is a starry night with tiny pinpricks of light, with one particularly large, twinkling star.

"Sure, you look at the night sky and you can't really tell the difference between any of 'em. Except one. The

brightest star in the sky, Venus. The morning star. The deceiver knew that this brilliance meant this star was the one causing all the trouble. And she seethed, oh how she seethed. All those millennia of rest and those lil assholes down there were trying to undo her hard work! So, tired, old, and far past creativity, she simply waved her hand dismissively, and the entire village including Wolan was simply... gone. Not even corpses or so much as a charred mark on the forest ground remained." Hemlock's hands form the shape of a bird, but the shadow cast on the van is very clearly Hemlock herself, wearing her longcoat.

"Now something I forgot to mention is that Wolan took on his own son. Of course he did. He had a lot of love, wisdom, belief, and just plain ol' goofy weirdness to pass down. And he raised that kid good. Strong, huge, a firm believer... Maybe not too bright. Nobody's perfect, not even Wolan. This kid loved to take her father's axe and practice some sick moves on trees and shrubs out in the deep woods. When the kid came back after swinging that silly hunk of metal around all night, she was *sure* there was a village here. Once. She had never been lost before, how could she be? And then... That horror dawned on her. Of what happened there. And she saw there, in the middle of the clearing, two simple words, barely etched into the dirt. So imperceptible that only a child panicking trying to find her father and village would notice it." And she drops her hands to her sides, and the shadows spell

out the words “No more.” in a jagged font on the side of the van.

“This kid... Yeah not too bright but she picks up on things pretty quick. She ran out into the woods, carrying that dumb heavy axe, until that was the only civilized part of her. Six months she wandered, following the herds and flow of the rivers, until one day she saw some fire in the woods. But... controlled. Inviting.” Hemlock forms a heart with her fingers, and the shadows of Lily and Oak sitting down at a campfire are cast large against the van.

“She had found... people. Here, in the middle of nowhere, with some clunky ol’ piece of metal on rubber wheels behind them. At first, the kid was acting on instinct alone, and grabbed that food the other two were cooking, and ran back into the woods! Y’see, wild animals are real skittish. But those two weirdos didn’t leave. That means more food right? But... boy these two really were weird, they gave this kid food, and talked to her! Were nice to her. And the kid started to remember her old man, and how dumb and goofy he was. And how kind. Y’see... Even a wild animal can be tamed. With enough love.” Hemlock stuffs her hands in her coat pockets, the only shadow cast against the van is her own as anyone would expect, and she plops down heavily on the stump across from Sequoia, simply looking at her.

Shock, horror, and sadness fight for dominance on Sequoia’s face. “Lock... I... I don’t know what to say.”

Hemlock starts laughing. "Yeah, I'm real proud of that one. Except the ending, feels kinda rushed, but then, the interesting parts were already over. A good storyteller shouldn't belabor the point when it's already been made. When I came up with it, it filled my head so intensely that I had to write it down, right then and there. I was so into it that I totally missed curtain call and Lily bopped me on the head so hard that I think I still have the lump."

Sequoia just stares at her wide eyed for a few seconds, then slowly shakes her head. "Wait, what?"

Hemlock shrugs, stands up, and starts plucking the papers with scribbles off of where they've been nailed up, throwing them in the fire one by one as she talks. She pulls the nails out with her bare hands, and tosses them in a pile. "A story is just a story, Coy. It doesn't need to be true to be fascinating. In fact, most true things are boring as hell. That story about me being feral and having an orc father and my village and shit... That's all made up. We in the biz call that world building." She looks over her shoulder, directly into Sequoia's eyes. "It was real weird to me that first night we met when you told us that story about school, and how similar it was to mine. At its heart."

Sequoia's eyes bulge, and she leans forward. "How much-"

Hemlock shrugs again, continuing to pull down the runes, her back to Sequoia. "I guess a lot of great stories



are pretty similar. Especially when they're told by expert storytellers like you and I." The last paper is cast into the fire, and Hemlock dusts off her hands, standing over Sequoia from across the fire, looking down at her, shoving her hands in her coat pockets. "Wolanson is just a stage name. My real last name is Fogsea, and I grew up with Lily and Oak in Yama. That's how come we're so comfortable with each other and basically know what each other's thinking. What else can I say? I'm as boring as dry toast. My parents were pretty typical. Mom was a human doctor, dad was an elf lawyer, so they weren't around much. I spent a lot of time at Birch's gym, getting my ass kicked, so I could learn how to fight. Don't even remember why, really. Birch hits real hard, probably knocked a few bolts loose. I think it was just my way of rebelling against my parents, as all teenagers do. Anyways, my folks died overseas while on their second honeymoon. In Rainsoaked. Ten years ago. Never knew how."

Sequoia's hands go to her mouth and she gasps. Her voice is like it's being drawn from her slowly, against her will. "No way."

"So I basically lived at the gym and y'know how Lily's folks are, and I was a pretty happy teenager, all things considered. Then of course we all left home two years later so it didn't make a big difference anyways. That's when I decided to start going by Hemlock, to fit in with the other two and have a theme for the troupe. Even legally

changed it to that five years ago, altho I kept my last name to honor my parents. I've known those two knuckleheads since before milk money days. Sorry for the deception, girly. It kinda sucks being so mundane and boring. All of you are so interesting and weird, even Lily, that I kinda felt left out. I love hearing stories from folks, in part because I'm so damn boring. You get so into stories that you just want your whole life to be one. A traveling troupe of orcs visited a lot, they were kinda our inspiration really, and I spent a lot of time with them, my folks being absent or dead and all, and they taught me the belief because sure, why not. Couldn't hurt right? Nothing in the world's so serious that you can't at least try, not even the belief. The belief's just a story too, if you think about it. Anyways, since my folks died overseas and they never did have any bodies to bring back, there ain't no graves. Sorry I can't show them to you to prove it. You can ask the gals and Lily's folks tho."

Sequoia just looks on in shock for a few moments longer. She speaks barely above a whisper. "You give me your continental ID right now."

Hemlock chuckles and digs in her pocket. "Figured you'd ask for that. Catch." and she pulls a wallet out of her coat and tosses it to Sequoia. "Go ahead and read it aloud. Just this once."

Sequoia catches it and quickly flips through it, until she reaches a thick, plastic card with Hemlock's photo on

it. “Hemlock Tsuga Fogsea, point of origin Yama, Brezitella.” She still holds the wallet, but her arm goes limp. She hangs her head and casts her eyes down to the forest floor. She doesn’t say anything for a long time. “Lock... no... Why would you lie about all that... I wouldn’t have cared...”

“Keep reading. You’re almost to the good part of my *best* story.”

“What good part...” Sequoia lifts the wallet back up to her face, and then grips the wallet with both hands. She shoots her head up at Hemlock, her eyes wide. “Gender: X’?”

Hemlock’s face is blank, unreadable. She simply looks into Sequoia’s eyes, her voice emotionless in a way Sequoia would never expect from Hemlock. “Did you know that the Tsuga is a genus of coniferous trees that *look* like the deadly hemlock tree, but aren’t? They’re real wide, to protect smaller critters from the dangers in the sky. And to protect their seeds, that they scatter out, forming a low canopy over long periods of time. Where the tree’s not threatened, anyways. Something Lily taught me.”

Sequoia stares back, slowly shaking her head. “No way. But you just said-”

“Sunflower never did tell you what kinda backlash happened back ten years ago, did she. I wonder if we’ll

ever know. Y'know, I don't blame you for being so dizzy for her. Real smart gal like that? She sure put the world back together in one continuous timeline without anything out of place, didn't she."

"Wh-what?"

"Remember that first night when we were walking down Feymist Ave, before the beach? And you were telling us about your creator's cult on Earth way back before the Reveal? That they demanded their cultists shed the dignities of clothing, grooming, names, and gender? And to shun modesty?"

Sequoia shoots to her feet, putting her hands on the frame holding the cooking pot, leaning towards Hemlock, only barely not being burnt by the fire. "What!"

Hemlock puts her finger to her lips and shushes Sequoia, winking and smiling. "Yeah, I remember you telling us about that too. I just wanted to make sure I wasn't going goofy before my time. Between Lily and Birch, my brain's got so many lumps that it's more like a mountain range." She makes her way around the fire and puts her hand on Sequoia's shoulder, looking down at her and smiling. "Y'know, life's absurd, Coy. Everything's a coincidence, and meaning and purpose are delusions. Even if you know something's true, you can believe whatever you want, even if it's totally contrary to what you know. Especially then. Just because someone says

something's true, it doesn't make them right." She winks again. "It's a lesson a lil black birdy taught me once."

Sequoia reaches up and grabs her by the collar, pulling her down. "You?! And the other two?!"

Hemlock shakes her head. "*All four of us* are a buncha morons in love, wandering aimlessly through life, fucking up as much as we can and having some fun along the way."

Sequoia lets Hemlock go, and shakes her head. "You... you dummy." and she wraps her arms around Hemlock's waist, burying her face in her chest.

Hemlock wraps her hand behind Sequoia's head and holds Sequoia to her, talking softly. "As it should be, Coy." She lifts Sequoia's head up by her chin so she can look her in the eyes, and smiles warmly. "Who cares about anything important. Who cares about someone else's truth. You find the truth you love and believe in it with your whole heart. Life's too beautiful and weird and short to worry about shit that in the end, don't matter. Caring about big world garbage is for boring people with agendas, not losers in love like us. I'm real happy I get to walk in love with you and them other two lovebirds. Even Sunflower... when she's around. Who cares what's real or not. The only thing we can prove to each other is the love we feel for the four of us. Maybe even five of us, someday. That's our world. That's all we need."

Sequoia smiles back up at Hemlock and sniffs back her tears. "As it should be, Lock."

Hemlock lets her go and turns her head towards the fire. "Anyway, I totally wrecked this stew. Probably the pot too. My bad. What's say you and I head over to the Gnarled Root? We can call Lily's folks to have them tell the gals to meet us there. They should be wrapping up their big dinner by the time we get done with our meals and we can have dessert and coffee. My treat."

Sequoia laughs. "We pool the money, dummy."

Hemlock laughs with Sequoia. "Like I said, my treat. ... So you never did answer me."

The smile on Sequoia's face fades. "No, I didn't, did I." She looks down at the sweater she's wearing and tugs on it. "Are you sure it's safe?"

Hemlock nods her head. "Wouldn't have asked and given you that if it wasn't."

Sequoia's silent for a few moments longer. She smiles up at Hemlock. "To just let the tide take me." She slips the sweater off and tosses it in the fire, and holds Hemlock's hand. She isn't even surprised when the sweater reduces to ash in an instant.

"Atta girl." The two walk down the trail to the bus stop, hand in hand. "C'mon. I'll tell you about the time Oak forged us some IDs when we were teenagers so's we

could get in a bar and she fucked them up so bad we spent the night in the clink.” Hemlock stops and looks down at Sequoia and winks. “Y’know Coy... Oak really has come a long way in the past five years. Both emotionally and skillfully, and not just magic. But let’s keep that between us. If there’s anyone listening, they don’t need to know.”

Sequoia’s eyes grow wide. “You really are-” and she looks at the wallet still in her other hand. She flips it open and looks at the hard plastic card slipped inside of it. She stares at it for a moment longer before flipping the wallet closed and slipping it into one of Hemlock’s pockets. “A really wonderful storyteller and an even better friend. Yeah, I’d like to hear that one. Y’know Lock, I really love how much we get each other. We know how to read between the lines and pick up on the subtleties of each other. We also know that a good story leaves the mysteries mysterious.”

Hemlock lets out a short laugh. “You ain’t kidding. Hey Coy, couldja get that for us?” The campfire goes out in an instant, and they walk hand in hand under the dim light of the stars above them. If there’s any constellations visible, they go unnoticed.

You don't always find a branch of the Crossguard Guild in the heart of a city. Feymist being the small, sleepy town it is, town square is simply where it makes the most sense. But for a heavily industrialized, modern city like Yama, the Crossguard Guild is a bit... old fashioned. Like Birch's gym. Both are relics of a bygone era being slowly swept away by the aftermath and expansion of the mechanical revolution. Sure, Crossguards are enormously skilled and wield great authority, but... as the world shrinks, so does its need for warriors. The police force grows, military ranks swell, both benefit greatly from technological advancements, and people become more complacent with their roles in society. Numbers replace skill. Crossguards are only truly needed for things like monster extermination, which is largely covered by Freelancers anyways, and events like Rainsoaked, and Rainsoaked was a fluke. Nothing even remotely close to something that scary has happened for centuries. Why would it? Only a maniac would want something like enormous power or to summon a world devouring beast, and maniacs have a hard time amassing any force in the world. Even on the off chance someone has the opportunity and the will to do something that crazy, they know there's no way they'll actually get away with it or accomplish their goals. Not when literally the whole world is against them, and the modern world is so well equipped to handle things like that. It takes a maniac's maniac to do something like Rainsoaked ten years ago, and the stars have to align juuuust right. Often literally. A



sensical, logical world simply doesn't allow for insanity on that level. It's one of those once in a millennia occurrences that scars the psyche of the world until it's generations behind it. Or should be. The majority of the Crossguards' business comes from picking up where the police leave off. Missing people and objects the police claim they simply don't have the time and resources to investigate. Escorting people through monster infested wilds. And of course, soothing the peoples' minds that if something did go totally haywire, the Crossguards will resolve it swiftly and competently. The Crossguards survive by building connections with the community.

So it shouldn't be any surprise that the Crossguard Guild's Yama branch isn't terribly far from Birch's gym. Not up the street, but in the same neighborhood, at any rate. Birds of a feather and all that. It's beneficial to both of them. Birch being the continent renowned martial artist she is, it's far preferable for Crossguards to keep up on their training by challenging the monster with wild blue hair and a muted expression that'll merely beat them to a pulp than to challenge actual, real monsters who don't care about such things as mortality. And the Crossguards being the enormously skilled combatants they are, Birch can keep from being *too* bored. And make some side cash to keep the gym open to boot. Two relics, perpetuating their own survival against the onslaught of the modern world.

This particular relic smiles to herself as she stops at a utility pole on her way to the Crossguard Guild. She puts her hand on a colorful poster advertising an upcoming play called “The Bizarre Tale of Professor Videmar” and grins wider, shaking her head. “‘Bizarre’ being the operative word for them.” She makes a mental note of the date and location, and continues on her way to the guild. She puts her hand on the door’s knob, takes a deep breath, and lets it out slowly as she walks in, trying not to flinch at the sound of the bell above the door jingling. All good relics of the past have a bell over their door. “Good evening, Rufus.”

The guildmaster of the Yama branch of the Crossguard Guild, an old man with a wizened beard and bushy eyebrows that threaten to obscure his eyes, wearing humble robes looks up from the paperwork he’s pouring over, and pushes it to the side. “Good evening, Sunflower. How was your trip up?”

“Uneventful.” Sunflower puts down her duffel bag and scribbles in a book on the counter. “There’s still vacancy, right?” Sunflower already knows the answer, but small talk is a key component of modern society. Sunflower’s about as good at it as Sequoia.

Rufus nods. “Can’t recall the last time we were all filled up.” He reaches into his robe and pulls out a notepad and pen. “So let’s have it.” Rufus has known Sunflower long enough to know not to bother with the small talk.

Sunflower sighs. “Dean Bergen’s experiment was just that, an experiment. Only the first step in a much larger plot. Summoning a demon up here permanently was only to see if he could.”

Rufus scribbles, not looking up from his notepad. “Has there been any other summoning since?”

“No. Or at least, the university is denying it. Personally, I believe them. We would’ve seen movement if they had taken their plot to the next step.”

“If there is a plot. Why did they put a bounty on the ‘monster’ if they intentionally summoned it?”

Sunflower shrugs. “Apparently, that was an independent action on the part of the school security. That’s why it went to the Freelancer Board instead of us, it was cheaper. The offending security members have since been relieved of duty.”

“I see.” Rufus looks up from his notepad. “Continue.”

Sunflower puts a hand on her hip and shifts her weight to one foot. “My theory is that he plans to summon them in large quantities, to form an army.”

Rufus puts his notepad down and removes his glasses, pinching the bridge of his nose and squinting. He sighs. “To what end, Sunflower? Dean Bergen is an outstanding member of the Church of Cecilia. Why would he engage in blasphemy and heresy? Why would he even

want an army of demons? He's already dean of the largest university and research center on the continent. Why would he throw away everything he's worked so hard for? He has to know that conquering the continent just wouldn't be possible thanks to the Crossguards and military."

Sunflower's silent for a few moments. She's already fighting uphill and she's only just started. But, a report is a report, and it should be complete or not started to begin with. Maybe it'll help sort it out in her mind. "...I think he's trying to get Cecilia to reveal Herself again. You're right, he is an outstanding member of the Church, whose numbers have been dwindling more and more with each passing year. Cecilia hasn't been seen or heard from since the Reveal. People are starting to believe that She's no longer watching. No one even really believes in Hell and demons anymore. He's trying to force Her to appear by bringing back Her hated enemy. If She were to reveal Herself again, belief in Her would surge, possibly enough to snuff out any disbelievers. Cecilia returning would drastically change the world, as it did back then. It would spark worldwide unrest and strife. It's... just a theory, but if he can show Her that without actual scripture from Her, the Knowledge just isn't enough and that lack of context is what causes strife amongst Her creation, She'll actually hand down scripture and edicts for us to follow. A belief system turned into an expansion of the Knowledge. That would essentially make him *the* religious leader and

authority on the planet. Could be a power play to move up the chain in the Church. Or found a new one altogether.”

Rufus only writes half of that down before giving up. “Wouldn’t She punish him for bringing back an army of demons to begin with?”

“That’s the part I’m struggling with. Our records of the Reveal are shaky at best... Maybe there’s a reason Cecilia felt threatened by the demons. Maybe they’re a bargaining chip to get Her to write scripture. Maybe... Maybe they’re a sacrifice. Use them as bait to lure out Cecilia and then betray them by either banishing them or... Maybe it’s to scare people into believing in Hell again and follow Cecilia’s edicts. I dunno. It doesn’t feel right. I feel like once I get this piece solved, I’ll have a complete picture of what’s going on.”

Rufus shakes his head. “These... These are some pretty extreme conclusions to come to. Have you gained any proof of your theories?”

“...No. It’s just a gut feeling. It’s the only theory that makes sense to me. All I’ve managed to uncover is the details of the summoning experiment itself. Going to Nephil was a waste. Total dead end.”

“And what brings your investigation up here?”

Sunflower didn’t expect to be grilled so hard. This was supposed to be just a simple report. It takes her a

moment to think up a plausible lie. “Birch. Fighting her gives me clarity, opens up my mind to think more loosely and find the threads so I can tie them together. I’m due for a session this season anyways.”

Rufus crosses his arms. “Have you ever known anyone to not *know* Cecilia is divine?”

It’s a good thing Sunflower’s made it a habit to think carefully before she opens her mouth. “...No. But knowing isn’t the same as believing. All we have is the Knowledge, we utterly lack context. That’s why there’s so many different sects of Cecilian worship. It’s... just a hunch, but I can’t shake this gut feeling I have.”

“I see.” Rufus strokes his beard for a few moments. “I want to say you’re being overly paranoid again. These conclusions... they’re extreme, bizarre, but... they make their own sort of sense, if Bergen was a madman. I’m just not sure how you jumped from a summoning experiment with a demon to causing a second Reveal. I want to say you’re being overly paranoid, your imagination running wild with you, but... that’s exactly what I said to you ten years ago. Keep at it. I know you’ll find the loose thread and pull on it til you reach its end.”

“I guarantee it. I won’t let this become another Rainsoaked. Now then, it’s been a long trip and I just want to collapse. Good night, Rufus.” Sunflower picks up her

duffel and heads up the stairs. She's only a few steps up when Rufus stops her.

"Oh Sunflower? ... Are you *sure* that's why you're up here? Are you *sure* you haven't known anyone to not know about Cecilia?"

Sunflower shakes her head. "I don't follow, sir."

"Are you sure it isn't to follow up with a strangely demonic looking carnie that's been seen around the neighborhood lately? The one Carnation said you talked with several times in Feymist at the start of your investigation?"

Sunflower mentally kicks herself. Of course another Crossguard would've noticed her talking with Sequoia in Feymist. Sloppy. Should've known she couldn't keep her a secret, not from the guild. "Leave her out of this. She's just another unfortunate victim of a ritual gone wrong. I've already verified that-"

"With the Knights of Cecilia?"

"You know I'm not on good terms with them. They could be in on this with Bergen for all we know. They have to sanction and supervise any summoning experiment, after all. But no, I verified it with her and her colleagues."

"So... you're still saying that the demon was killed in the catacombs and this is all just... a coincidence. A misunderstanding."

“That’s right. If she was a demon, she *certainly* would not be operating out in the open where the whole world could see her, and she would’ve been hunted down by the Knights of Cecilia by now. Besides, I verified that she has a continental ID. Human (Variant), like her colleague. Take one look at both of them and tell me they didn’t goof up a ritual. Depictions in texts of summoned demons also look quite different from her, besides. She’s just a friend. The shows they put on make me laugh.”

“I see. I believe you, Sunflower. For now. Just remember where your loyalties lie. Protecting friends is fine, so long as it doesn’t interfere with the Guild’s goals. After all, we’re the ones keeping the world in one piece. One more thing. We’ll need you to clear the board tomorrow. If you have time to spend with traveling carnies, you have time to take some of the load off your juniors.” Sunflower says nothing, she simply stands on the stairs, looking at Rufus. “That’s all. Have a good rest.”

“Sir.” Sunflower heads up the stairs, and enters the first room she comes across. She clicks the door closed and hangs her head, gripping her sword’s sheath tightly. She wants to hurl it. Slam it against the wall as hard as she can and hear the loud thump, feel the rattle of the cheap walls as it bounces off. Instead, she gingerly removes it from her hip and leans it against the door. She sits down heavily on the bed and buries her face in her hands. Maybe she is paranoid. Maybe she is cracking. Ten years of



looking over her shoulder, trying to find every angle of every case that comes her way. She's tired, and not just from the trip up. The mind plays tricks on you when you're this tired. But she can't shake her fears either. Can't forgive herself if she's right and does nothing about it. One more case. This time she means it. "Where my loyalties lie... What story do I want to write... .. Yeah, I've made my choice too, Sequoia." Sunflower climbs under the blankets and exercises the most useful skill any Crossguard can have: the ability to fall asleep in an instant, no matter what weighs on their mind. She doesn't even bother changing out of her clothes.

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The world didn't end after all, only the night. Oak lived to see another day. That isn't to say that it wasn't the most stressful night of her life. It took... some convincing to make Ficus and Stephen realize that yes this was Oak, but once they did the look on their faces was priceless. It's this image Oak plays back in her mind over and over to make her laugh off the stress. It's not even that it went that terribly. The shock of who Oak was now cast a pall over the dinner, but... her parents were genuinely concerned for her. In their own distant way, they showed the love they had for their daughter and accepted reality as it was. They're even coming to tonight's show.

The news of her playing at Teufelnacht filled her parents with pride. They forgave each other, not that Oak

did anything that needed forgiving, but their bond tightened for the first time in... Well, it's not worth thinking about how long it's been. Having Birch and Zevon there was definitely the right choice. Birch's reputation is known by everyone in the neighborhood, even squares like Ficus and Stephen. Her mere presence afforded a considerable amount of restraint on their parts. Zevon gushed about Oak, talking about what a joy it's been to watch her grow up and how proud he is of her. He laid the guilt on thick. Oak took Hemlock up on her offer about letting it all out. It was a short burst of emotions, but intense, and Oak felt better afterwards. Classic Oak. Sequoia and Hemlock didn't get up to much that night. Just some old cartoons, altho they did become so absorbed in them that Hemlock forgot she had a stew going and wrecked their pot. Lily bops her one, but it's easy enough to replace.

Oak's understandably a bit nervous about tonight's show, but she's a professional unprofessional. The show must go on. She spends her time before the show going over her lines and immersing herself in the part. Sequoia looks out over the crowd of people from behind the donation box's table. Again, she can't help but compare this to Feymist. In Feymist, they pulled in crowds from nearly every walk of life. Here, it's mostly fellow artists and societal outcasts. The grind of meaningless labor makes people tired, and unwilling to go out and take in a show miles outside of their apartments in the city proper. There are a few families, the neighborhood isn't just for artists

after all. It's not as big as the crowds they pulled in Feymist, but all the people are fascinating, nevertheless. Sequoia got to meet Ficus and Stephen as they came into the show. They didn't quite know what to make of her. They awkwardly asked if she was "like Oak". No, she's just from the deep south, she responds with a laugh. Sequoia smiles to herself. She definitely would've made Oak look normal in comparison. She wishes she could've made good on her threat of having them swallow bugs. Ah well. It's almost showtime. She picks up the donation box and goes to head backstage when she hears the sharp sound of a twig snapping deliberately, pointedly in her direction. She turns around and drops the box on the lawn, letting it bounce without thinking of it for a moment longer. She runs forward with all of her force and speed.

"Good evening, Sequ-GACKT!" If it wasn't for Sunflower's considerable strength and training, she'd be laid out flat on her back on the lawn. Instead, she merely has the life squeezed from her by a tearful Sequoia.

Sequoia buries her face in Sunflower's chest. "It's... it's really you! You're really here! I was just telling the gals last night how much I missed you! I... I can't believe it! How'd you know we were here? Was it Birch?"

To Sequoia's great surprise, Sunflower returns the embrace. She wraps her arms around Sequoia's back and squeezes tight before looking down into her eyes. "You plaster your posters all over the neighborhood, doofus. I

just got into town last night, so I haven't spoken to Birch yet. I saw one of your posters and came right here, to see you."

Sequoia's eyes grow larger. "To see... me?"

Sunflower smiles. "Yes. You, specifically." Sequoia starts to stammer, and Sunflower laughs. "Haha, you're blushing again. So tonight's show is The Bizarre Tale of Professor Videmar, eh? I have to admit, I don't know this one."

Sequoia smiles. "And I've never performed this one before. Should be a fantastic show." She releases Sunflower from her grasp and stands back, looking Sunflower over. "('Work in the present', eh...)" She gets a wicked grin on her face. "Say... There is a scene where the constable crosses swords with a suspect. How about you play the suspect? We should have a costume that fits you, and people will go wild for the kinda stunts you can pull."

Now it's Sunflower's turn to be surprised and stammer. "I don't think-"

Sequoia rolls her eyes and then her head. "Come ooon, what can it hurt? It'll be fun, trust me. It's a real short scene, you would have like, five lines. Even if you flub them, no one's gonna care. So how about it? You never know how you'll like something until you try it."

Sunflower looks around nervously. "But... all these people..."

Sequoia shrugs and takes Sunflower's hand, smiling and tugging her towards the stage. "Psh, who cares about that. No one's gonna stand up and scream 'that's Sunflower!' or anything like that, and when you're up on the stage, the performance is all that matters. Just don't focus on the crowd and you'll slip right into the role, guaranteed. So c'mon, say yes?"

Sunflower's pretty sure the guild has eyes on the show because of Sequoia. Rufus all but confirmed it. Is this how she wants to live? Constantly afraid of doing things because the guild will know? She cleared the board in record time today, didn't she? So why should the guild care? And even if they do... Why should she care about that? She looks down at the smiling, wide eyed face of the girl tugging on her hand and what little resolve she has dissolves. "A-alright Sequoia. You win. But I get to bail at the last second if I need to."

Sequoia grins. "I'll take it." She tilts her head. "Then after the show, you and I can just... talk. Maybe go to the Gnarled Root for coffee and dessert, just the two of us?"

Sunflower smiles back. "I'd like that. You go ahead and get ready, I have to pay my respects to Birch, then I'll meet you backstage."

Sequoia drops Sunflower's hand and balls her hands up to her chest. "I can't wait! Aaa this is gonna be fun! Don't get cold feet, or I'll come and getcha in front of everybody! See you soon!" and Sequoia scoops up the donation box, then jogs off to the stage, looking over her shoulder from time to time. Sunflower shakes her head, then scans the crowd.

Sequoia skids to a halt backstage, and roughly tosses the donation box onto the table backstage. The others turn to greet her, and their eyes go wide after seeing the state she's in. Lily glances at the donation box and sees that it's only the usual amount full. "You ok, Coy? You look like you just got told Cecilia's letting everyone back up."

"Better! Change of plans! Instead of Lily playing the suspect in the fight scene, it's gonna be Sunflower!"

The others all look at each other in shock. Lily shakes her head. "Wh-what? She's here? She *wants* to be on stage?!"

"Yeah! Well I mean, it took some convincing, but she said she would! Uhm. I hope that's ok."

Lily gets her trademark mischievous grin on her face and pinches her chin between her thumb and forefinger. "Well... I dunno..."

Sequoia rolls her head. "Liiiiiiiiiiil..."

“It is only five lines... and that’ll make the fight all the more intense... Well, if it means that much to you...”

Hemlock recoils slightly. “She’s not gonna cream me, is she?”

Sequoia shakes her head. “Haha, I doubt she’ll deviate from the play. Then she’d have to be on stage longer.”

Hemlock shrugs. “What the hell. It’ll be good to shake some of the rust off and give the crowd a real fight. It’s cool with me.”

Lily crosses her arms and taps her foot. “Do we even have any costumes her size? I’m way way shorter, Hemlock’s far too tall, and the two of you are shy by a decent number of inches.”

Oak thinks for a few moments. “We do still have that trunk full of my old costumes. She’ll probably fit into those.”

“Man, forgot that trunk even existed. Gonna have to blow the dust offa that one. Yeah, that’ll do. Works for us, Coy.”

Sequoia looks like she’s gonna explode. “Great! Oh and uhm. She and I are going out for coffee afterwards.”

Lily’s face shifts into teasing mode. “‘Coffee’, is it? So long as it’s in a seedy motel somewhere and not the van.”

“Haha, whatever.” Sequoia’s head droops slightly and she smiles warmly. “Thanks gals, it means a lot to me. She should be here soon. I’m not in it for a few scenes so I’ll get her up to speed.”

Hemlock crosses her arms. “I got a few scenes to go as well, so we can do a quick go over with the fight scene. Well well, look who it is.”

Sunflower trepidatiously walks backstage, looking around. She avoids looking directly at Hemlock. “Uhm. Hi. I’m ah... doing a scene with you, I’m told?”

Hemlock smiles. “Hey Sunflower, good to see you. Don’t be so nervous, you’re amongst friends. Come on over here to the van and we’ll get you set up with a costume. Sorry if it’s a bit musty, it ain’t been worn in five years.”

Sequoia blows on her fingers. “I can take care of that.”

“Oh yeah. Been awhile since you done laundry that way. That makes me feel a bit better. C’mon over here, Sunflower.” and Hemlock leads Sequoia and Sunflower out from backstage and to the van parked nearby. She climbs in, the other two close behind, and she talks over her shoulder as she drags out a dusty old trunk from a forgotten corner of the van. “Alright, so, the fight scene. The constable has to win in the end, see? We want to give them a realistic fight, but in the end the constable knocks



the sword from the suspect's hands and holds them at swordpoint. Can you do that?"

Sunflower nods. "I can pull my punches, in a manner of speaking, sure. L-let's ah... go over the lines."

Sequoia rubs Sunflower's shoulders. "Deep breaths, girl."

Hemlock tosses Sunflower a pile of clothes. "Here, put these on. There's still a lotta scenes to go, but it's better to be ready than change at the last second."

Sunflower looks around. "Where's the changing room?"

"Don't got one. Guess you can use the bathroom if you want, but it's pretty cramped. Just get changed here. Don't worry, we ain't pervs. Figured you warrior types wouldn't be shy about stuff like that." and Hemlock starts stripping off her clothes.

"Normally I'm not." Sunflower takes a deep breath. "What the hell. Let's do this." She starts removing her jacket and looks over at Hemlock. She manages to keep the shock off her face when she notices that Hemlock doesn't have a scar anywhere on her that indicates the blood in the catacombs was hers.

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Lily holds the key to the lockbox. “Drum roll, if you please.” Oak starts rolling her tongue, and Lily undoes the latch, flips it upside down over the mattress, and a decent amount of money slips freely from the box. “Dang, pretty good for Yama.” She pokes around and does a quick calculation of the cash. She pulls out a few bills and holds them out to Sunflower. “Fair’s fair, Sunflower. We pool the money, but since you aren’t sticking with us, you get an even cut.”

Sunflower holds up her hand and pushes the money back to Lily. “That’s not necessary. The experience itself was worth it. I appreciate the gesture, tho.”

Oak swishes her tail and smiles at Sunflower. “How’d you like it?”

“It was... surprisingly really fun. Even tho it was just a short demonstration fight, it was a bit thrilling to do it for an audience like this.”

Sequoia drapes her arm around Sunflower’s neck. “Hehe. I think she’s got a taste for it, gals.”

“L-let’s not get carried away. I still have my responsibilities to the guild.”

Sequoia lets her arm slide off Sunflower’s neck. “Aw. Well, just know that any time you wanna come on stage with us, you’re more than welcome.”

Lily leans into Oak's arms and makes a kissy face up at her before smiling at Sunflower. "Seriously, Sunflower, you were great. You seem to have a knack for showmanship. We'd be happy to have you any time."

Sunflower shakes her head. "Even after all those years... You gals are something else. Thank you. I'm gonna go speak to Birch before Sequoia and I head out. See you outside, Sequoia."

Sequoia waves. "See ya soon, Sunflower." She watches her leave the van, then buries her face in her hands. "Unholy shit I've never been so nervous in my life."

Oak pulls Sequoia into her lap with Lily and bends down to peck her forehead. "Haha, it'll be fine, don't worry. Just be your usual charming self and it'll all turn out ok."

Hemlock crosses her arms in front of her and smiles. "Go get her, girly."

Lily pecks Sequoia's cheek. "And bring her back down to Earth for us, wouldja? We weren't just being polite you know! It'd rock to have her perform some more with us."

Sequoia just smiles. "Thanks gals. I'll do my best. Ok." She stands up and slaps her cheeks a few times. "Showtime. See you gals tonight." and she walks out of the van.

The others watch the entrance of the van as Sequoia leaves and are quiet for a long few moments. Oak looks down at Lily. "Think she'll pull it off?"

Lily wriggles deeper into Oak's arms and closes her eyes, smiling. "Not tonight, anyways. Little by little tho, Coy's putting weight on that badge. Someday it's bound to fall off."

"And then?"

Lily shrugs. "What am I, a fortune teller? We'll find out on that day."

Hemlock lazily waves her arm. "Wanna greet the folks and break down the set?"

Lily just as lazily waves her off. "Nah, we got the stage for a few more hours and Ficus and Stephen can make awkward conversation with my folks for a bit. Coy gets a break, so do we. Let's just bask in this glow for a bit."

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The walk to the Gnarled Root Diner isn't very long. Its owner wisely chose to purchase and renovate an old wooden building near the fairgrounds, and it's reaped the benefits each festival. Between festivals, it's still a hotspot of local activity, seeing how it's close to the park and open twenty-four seven. Sunflower and Sequoia mostly talk about the performance on the way there. Sunflower's nervousness slowly melts away, and conversation flows

easily from her. The inside of the diner matches the exterior quite well. Simply lacquered, rough hewn wooden walls with tables made from reclaimed fallen trees. Cushionless wooden chairs, paintings from local artists covering the walls, dimly but warmly lit, and a long bar with simple bar stools. It's quiet this late. Sunflower breathes a sigh of relief. They have a seat in a corner, order coffees, and Sequoia orders three different desserts. Sunflower shakes her head. "Are you gonna be able to fit all those in you?"

Sequoia laughs and sips her coffee. "If anything, I thought I was going easy on the food. Those effects aren't free, y'know. Everything in this world has a cost. Lucky for me, mine lets me try every food in existence up here." Sunflower chuckles. "Thanks for coming out with me, Sequoia. Man, you were on fire on stage! Seeing your moves was something else."

"Was it really that good? I was holding back like... a lot."

"It was great! See, that's the thing, for performances, you don't need to use all of your skill. This isn't a fight for life or death, it's entertainment. That isn't to say that I wouldn't pay top dollar to see you and Birch go all out." Sequoia takes another sip and grins at Sunflower. "Hehe. Did she have anything to say?"

Sunflower sighs and shakes her head, taking a sip of her coffee. "Only that during our next session, she's not holding back so she can 'defend her girls' honor', whatever that means. Sounds like you already know a bit about that."

"A little. Once she heard about bullying the gals over the years and about when you tried to kill me she said she had 'very stern words' for you."

Sunflower hangs her head. "My past comes back to haunt me once again..."

"Hehe." Sequoia talks into her cup as she looks up at Sunflower. "So uhm. How goes the case?"

Sunflower looks down into her cup and rubs the edge. "Sequoia, has any demon expressed a desire to... harm anyone ah... how did you phrase it... topside?"

Sequoia shakes her head. "Only in the context of punishing a summoner for forming a pact with us. None of them harbor any ill will towards topsiders in general. Sure, topsiders sided with Cecilia, but we get it. We were awful lil shits and it's not like they exiled us, Cecilia did. It's not like we have an army waiting to invade should we ever find a way to come back. Y'know, more than we have. We have generals and a corps, but that's more for fulfilling a role in Hell that Cecilia demanded of us. Discipline keeps people in check. Much like how we didn't have university or different castes or districts before we were banished.

See, demons abide by certain rules that no one really has a full understanding of besides maybe The Boss. We have to follow these rules, because it's what Cecilia demanded of us. Deviation from these rules, supposedly, results in punishment, altho I can't say as I really believe that."

Sunflower levels her gaze at Sequoia. "Are demons capable of harming people? From what I've seen of your abilities, it's all benign things. If a demon really wanted to, *could* they harm people?"

Sequoia's face falls a bit. "Well, we never *directly* punish the summoner, it's just ironic twists on their demands. I can create fire, so I guess it is possible. Reality was once ours to play with like putty, much like Cecilia, so I imagine if a demon was malicious, which again no demon really is, they *could* seriously mess people up."

"And this corps, what's it like? Is there any function to it other than discipline?"

"Not that I'm aware of, but I never associated with anyone from the corps. Members of the corps are way too uptight, even moreso than my professors. My creator was a general back during the war, but they're more of a peacekeeper and negotiator. I definitely can't imagine them commanding an army, it's not their style. They certainly haven't told me of any other function besides discipline. I don't really know why we have it? Like, why do they demand so much discipline of some demons, but

not others? It doesn't make any sense to me. Maybe it's for punks like me, and I only managed to escape being sent to the corps by the grace of my creator. Why do you ask?"

"...Just ...paranoid I guess. From what I've unearthed in my investigation, the summoning experiment was to call forth a demon for a sustained amount of time, rather than just a few hours, and for their abilities to not be bound to a pact's request. Just so you know, the university thinks you're dead, killed by Hemlock. Well, not Hemlock specifically. It's fortunate for all of you that the guards were too incompetent to get a proper record of the Freelancer who... did the job."

Sequoia looks into Sunflower's eyes. "You mean they still think I was the result of the summoning experiment."

Sunflower opens her hands and spreads them on the table. "Which is hard to argue against. You don't know how you got up here, and you coincidentally came up here at the same time the experiment was underway, and under the college at that. I'm not saying that's for sure how you got up here, but I will say the timing and location of where you appeared are certainly... coincidental and convenient."

Sequoia sighs and shakes her head. "Well, nothing to be done about that line of thinking, I suppose. So what's next in your investigation?"



“I’ve hit a bit of a dead end. There’s people to interview that were involved with the experiment, but they’re scattered across the continent. I doubt they have much to offer that I don’t already know. I prefer to interview people in person, my presence has... an effect on people, but I may have to settle for phone calls. I still have to talk to the Knights of Cecilia about my own findings from last month. Don’t worry, I’m not going to tell them about you.”

“Thanks for that, and for telling me straight up about your investigation. That’s not why I asked you out here, tho.”

“I thought not.”

Sequoia is silent for a few moments. The server brings over her desserts, but they go uncharacteristically untouched. Instead, Sequoia looks into Sunflower’s eyes with a pleading, teary look. “I asked you out here because I really like you, Sunflower. I want to plead my case one more time.”

Sunflower shakes her head. “You don’t need to plead your case, you’ve done nothing wrong.”

Sequoia vigorously shakes her head. “No no, I mean... You’ve hit a dead end, right? You’ve found out as much as you need to find out about this investigation. If I was summoned by them or not doesn’t actually matter, what matters is that I’m here, with you, now in this moment. If

you're worried about them summoning an army of demons to conquer the continent or world or whatever, don't. No demon will defy the will of Cecilia, and the summoner would just be punished severely anyways. There's no such thing as a rock solid pact, there's always a way around the summoner's words. If the world's in danger, it's not from Hell, I assure you. And if the world is in danger from some other threat, then there's more than enough Crossguards to take up that task. It doesn't have to be you specifically. So... I'm asking you, one last time, please... lay down your sword and come with us. Leave this world of violence and paranoia behind and come live with us in just peace and love. Look at how much you enjoyed being on stage! I haven't seen you that happy since I've known you. And that was only like five minutes! Imagine, this could just be your life! You traveled around the continent for three years on your training pilgrimage, right? Birch was telling me about how wonderful that sorta thing is. Well... That could be your life, just traveling around, helping people, making them laugh, making them wonder, amazing them... What you do for the Crossguards, sure that protects people, but at such a distance. You perform with us, and you'll see how directly you touch the hearts of people. And that's true protection, Sunflower, not this hero stuff. You'll be protecting people from everything they're stressing over by making them forget about it. That's what truly matters to people, not some vague concept of protecting them from dangers that just don't ever happen. Nothing's happened in ten

years, Sunflower! Who the Hell even knows how long it was before then that something that big had happened! Nothing in any history book covering the past five hundred years that I've read! And the people you've helped in that time, they didn't need you. Maybe they needed a Crossguard, maybe not, but they didn't need *you*. We need you. *I* need you. No, it's not even that. *You* need *us*. How long are you going to keep putting off your life for other people? You've earned happiness and peace. You deserve comfort and companionship. So please." Sequoia reaches forward and takes Sunflower's hands and squeezes them. Sunflower doesn't even struggle or pull her hands away. "Take my hand and come with me. Leave the Crossguards behind, and accept that you finally found someplace you truly belong. With us. With me. Please." Sunflower says nothing, she simply squeezes Sequoia's hands back. Sequoia laughs. "Maybe I should've said 'please' my case instead of 'plead' my case."

Despite herself, a smile spreads across Sunflower's face. "Pfft, doofus. Thanks for breaking the tension. ... Do you know why I joined to begin with?"

"You thought it was the best use of the skills you've developed?"

Sunflower tilts her head. "In a way, I suppose. I felt like it was my calling. My destiny. Fate had called me to duty, and I had to respond. I saved the life of an A class Crossguard before I joined, you know. She was wounded

and outnumbered by a horde of monsters, her back to a cliff wall, and I happened by the whole scene. The monsters never heard me coming, and my sword gave her the opening she needed to dispatch the monsters with me. After the battle, she told me it was fate that brought me there to her at that moment, and to come with her to learn more about the Crossguards. I felt like I was being given purpose. A duty to fulfill. Before then, I felt so lost, so aimless, so... useless. And then look at what happened right after I joined. It's hard to feel anything except validation that yes, this really is my destiny. I had somewhere I belonged, I had comrades, I had purpose, meaning to my life. I was *meant* for this, and what I did in Rainsoaked only proved that to me. Until now, I never even considered that there was anywhere else I could belong, anything else I could do with my life. And the past few years with the guild have been... taxing. You attain S class, and you no longer have peers. You no longer have comrades. You're... alone, again. Like I was when... when my master died and... anyways, you know that story."

Sequoia squeezes Sunflower's hands tighter. "But you've fulfilled your destiny, your new destiny can be with us. This is your new calling! And all that, that's all the more reason to leave it behind, now, before they trick you into being their savior once again!"

Sunflower shakes her head. "I know that, Sequoia, and I'm not saying you don't have a point. But... There's

something going on. I can feel it in my bones and see traces of it in my investigation. Bergen is up to something, and I aim to find out what and put a stop to it. I couldn't sleep at night, knowing what I know and knowing I can do something about it but chose not to. I want to make sure that... there is a world still. A world that allows you to exist and live freely. That's why I have to see this through to the end, wherever that may take me."

"And then?"

"...I'll consider it. I can't promise it, but... I'll give it serious and deep consideration. I just... I can't leave the case as it is. After this case. I promise."

Sequoia smiles. That's all she's gonna get tonight. Ah well. The seed's been planted, that's further than she thought she'd get. "I'll hold you to that. In the meantime," and Sequoia lets go of one hand and starts digging into her strawberry rhubarb pie at long last. "There's no reason you can't come on stage with us whenever you have the opportunity. It'll be good for you, and good for us too. Get you used to performing and get the gals used to having you around, y'know? Oh! I forgot to tell you! We're performing at Teufelnacht this year! Hm..." She looks Sunflower up and down. "Do you play an instrument?"

"I can play the violin and piano a bit. Why do you ask?"

“Well... The first show at Teufelnacht is gonna be my creator’s story of the Reveal, and the thing we’ve always thought was missing from that play is a score. I think you’ll be perfect for that.”

Sunflower laughs. “But you haven’t even heard me play.”

Sequoia shrugs. “I don’t need to. You’ll play from the heart, so it’ll be beautiful. That’s all that matters. We’re camping just at the edge of the trail leading into the Nashi woods, can’t miss us. We’re not really doing much between shows, so you can come over any time and we can practice what to play and when. We don’t have a piano... but we do have an analogue synth. A lot of the skills will transfer. Oh! Maybe you can play during the other shows too! We’re always lacking music, it’s the one thing that’s missing.” Sequoia tilts her head. “Maybe that’s the niche you can fill, for now. You don’t have to worry about acting since it seems to make you a little nervous, but it’ll get you involved with the shows.”

Sunflower is quiet for a long few moments. She looks down at her hand being squeezed by Sequoia and looks into her eyes and smiles. “Few things would make me happier.”

Sequoia grins between spoonfuls of ice cream. “‘Few things’? Not ‘nothing’?”

Sunflower smiles warmly and takes Sequoia's hand in both of hers. "Few things. ... Close your eyes, Sequoia."

"Why?"

"It's a... topsider tradition. Close your eyes." Sequoia closes her eyes and Sunflower gets up and sits next to Sequoia, lifting her held hand up as she walks around the table so she doesn't break contact. She cups Sequoia's chin in her other hand and kisses her, holding the kiss for as long as she has breath.

Sequoia opens her eyes, and even in the dim light Sunflower can tell they're damp. "Come back to the van with me."

"I... I can't. I have to check in with the guild tonight and I have an early day tomorrow. Trust me, I want to. But... I just can't."

Sequoia does her best not to look heartbroken. She kisses Sunflower's neck before resting her head on her shoulder, burrowing into the crook of Sunflower's neck and shoulder. "I'll wear you down yet. Walk me back to the stage at least?"

Sunflower kisses Sequoia's forehead and leans her head on hers. "Of course. But in a little bit. Let's just... stay here like this. For awhile, anyways."

"Few things would make me happier."

## Chapter 19

Analogue synths are quite the interesting devices, and the older the model you can find, the more interesting they become. The gals having bought all their instruments secondhand, well... more like third or fourth hand, theirs is quite old and interesting. Not “permanently installed into the wall with dozens of wires plugged into it” old and interesting, but old enough to be considered vintage. Certainly older than any of them. Cased in wood, real keys you press down, all sorts of switches and knobs and several output jacks. Sequoia was right, a lot of Sunflower’s skills with the piano transfer over, once the synth is configured properly for it. What Sequoia didn’t know, or expect, is that mimicking a piano wouldn’t be enough for Sunflower. True to her word, Sunflower stopped by as much as she could to practice scores for the plays the gals have planned for Teufelnacht. She took an instant liking to the old synth, and quickly found herself twisting the knobs to see what happens, sliding switches around, flicking switches, creating sounds beyond simply a simulacrum of a piano. It goes a long way towards easing out the last of the remaining tension between the gals and Sunflower. To see someone with just the pure joy of exploration and experimentation, how could any such barriers remain? She’s welcomed into their camp without



reservation. She never spends the night in the van. She does still have her responsibilities to the guild, after all.

It takes its toll on Sunflower. Seeing her play music during the plays before Teufelnacht as practice, the guild cracks the whip, demanding more and more of her. She forces herself to handle it. She hasn't attained S class for nothing. The guild's lessened presence and anachronism in Yama works in her favor. There's simply only so much work they *can* throw at her. That doesn't mean she isn't exhausted as the gals walk onto the fairgrounds for the first night of Teufelnacht. There's an hour or two before they need to get ready for the show, and this being Sequoia's first opportunity to go on rides and experience the rest of what a fair offers, and the first play being one so familiar to everyone, they take the time to walk the fairgrounds. Sequoia holds Sunflower's hand and swings their hands as they walk. She looks up at Sunflower with concern. "You sure you're up for the show tonight, Sunflower? You look *beat*."

Sunflower nods. "Wild horses couldn't keep me away. If I start to fall over, just levitate my back up." Sequoia snickers.

Lily leans forward and looks down the line. "This your first time at the festival, Sunflower?"

"Close, second. My master was visiting family that lives here, settling her affairs with them probably, and she

took the youngest of us with her to enjoy the festival. I was very young, probably about five or six. It was... very different back then.”

“Really? Oak and I have been coming here our whole lives and I remember it pretty much the same way as now. Well, since we were three, anyways. Maybe our memories are just warped from the gulf of time and coming here each year. Changing so slowly you never notice, y’know?”

“You remember coming here at three?”

Lily nods. “I remember it clearly because it’s where Oak and I met. Our parents sat and rested next to each other on some benches in the lil toddler play area, watching to make sure we were ok. She and I hit it off right away.” Lily laughs. “She looked so pathetic and lonely building sand castles by herself! I couldn’t help but play ‘giant monster’ with them.”

Oak gives a short laugh. “At first I was so upset, but then it was just so good playing with another kid that I started getting into it, building things just so she could roar and knock them over. Good times. Anyways, that’s one of the reasons this festival holds so much meaning to us.”

Hemlock’s tongue hangs out of her mouth and she gives the most exaggerated thumbs down she possibly can. “That story was so damn sappy that it ain’t no wonder

you two are glued together for life. It was so saccharine that the cotton candy booth gave up.”

Lily grins smugly. “Hehe, that’s the reaction I was looking for. Thanks for playing the game, Lock. Don’t stand too close, Sunflower, or you’ll get ensnared in the sap trap like these two have.”

Sunflower laughs. “Hey, you won’t hear me complaining.” She looks down at Sequoia. “What would you like to do first?”

Sequoia raises both her hands high in the air, taking one of Sunflower’s hands with her, and shouts “Rides!”

“Haha, I should’ve guessed.”

Oak turns to Lily. “How much do we got for tickets tonight, hon?”

Lily digs in her pocket with her free hand, the other occupied with Oak’s hand, and she tilts her head. “Lessee…”

Sunflower shakes her head. “It’s ok, I got it tonight.”

“Seriously? You sure? Tips have been even better since you started playing with us.”

“Positive. Clearing the board so much lately has netted me a pretty good sum of money. What good is money if you can’t use it to have some fun with friends?”

Hemlock gives a short belly laugh. “Now you’re speaking our language. Money’s only for helping people, survival, and fun.”

Lily pulls her hand out of her pocket, then hooks her thumb in it. “And burning for warmth. Alright, Sunflower, we’ll take you up on that. But you gotta take some of tonight’s tips in exchange, deal?”

Sunflower hands the ticket clerk a few bills and comes back with a roll of tickets. “Deal. What ride should we go on first?”

Sequoia’s eyes go wide as her gaze falls upon what appears to be a flying saucer covered in glittering, flashing lights. The line in front of the open hatch is relatively short. “*That one.*”

Lily’s face goes flat. “Did you pick that one just because the line’s short?”

Sequoia playfully huffs with a grin. “As if. How could I *not* want to go on something so weird and funky looking?” Sequoia tugs on Sunflower’s hand to lead her to the ride, and the others follow suit. They get in line, hand over their tickets, and the hatch closes behind them as they board the ride. If only Sequoia could watch the ride from the outside, she would probably be even more amazed by the speed at which it spins and the way the lights turn into blurs and lines, seeming to coil around the ride. After about two minutes, the ride slows, and the

hatch opens. Sequoia and Oak stumble out, Sequoia laughing madly, but the others have more of their composure to them. She looks back over at the ride as it starts up again, and stares at it as it spins. “Haha, that was *intense!* It doesn’t even look like it’s spinning that fast from out here!”

Lily playfully bops Sequoia between the horns. “That’s your head still spinning from being in there.”

Sequoia faces Hemlock and Sunflower. “I can’t believe you two were able to actually leave your seats. Who won in the end anyways?”

Sunflower folds her arms in front of her and grins. “Me. Hemlock didn’t have a prayer.”

Hemlock laughs. “No way, I got to the center first. The guy yelled at me before he even noticed you.”

Sunflower sticks her nose in the air and closes her eyes in mock haughtiness. “That doesn’t mean you beat me to the center! That just means you’re way too obvious.”

Sequoia shakes her head. “Between you two racing to the center and Oak and Lily getting upside down, I think we should probably cool it on that ride for the night.”

Oak smiles broadly. “It was worth it. If you aren’t lying sideways or upside down, you’re not actually experiencing the ride. Unless it’s your first time and you don’t know

about it, of course. Besides, I don't think I can take that loud, pulsating music more than once a night."

Sunflower looks down at Oak. "Your sensitive hearing?"

"Yeah, between the spinning and G forces and throbbing music, it's all my poor ears can take."

"Have you considered wearing a toque shaped for your ears? It might help."

Oak shakes her head. "I've tried that before, but it gets hot and stuffy in those. Just imagine pulling a thick woolen cap over *your* ears and how much heat that keeps in. I'd rather just go natural. I've learned to tune most background noise out, but that ride..."

Lily leans into Oak and kisses her cheek. "I'd love to see you go natural, baby."

Oak blushes deeply and starts to stammer. "Haha uhm that's! Stop, you're gonna turn me as red as my hoodie!"

"Hehe, that's the plan. How about we chill on the rides for a bit and play some carnival games?"

Oak starts grinning smugly. "There *is* a shooting gallery here."

Hemlock hangs her head. "The shark smells blood..."

The gals make their way to the shooting gallery, all taking a spot. Lily and Hemlock do as well as any average person. They've definitely played this game before. Sequoia and Sunflower... struggle. Sunflower isn't even sure how to hold the gun at first. Sequoia hits three targets, but Sunflower only hits a single target. Oak, however, barely even has to try. She fires each shot as quickly as the gun allows, each bullet finding its way to the center of each target. The attendant blows a whistle to signal the end of the game. Oak blows on the end of the rifle's barrel and grins. "Hehe. That's game, gals."

The attendant pulls a large plush tiger from behind the booth and holds it out to Oak, whistling. "I ain't never seen anyone hit that many targets that fast before, miss. Or should I say, never miss?"

Oak laughs loudly at that. "That was terrible! Mind if I steal that one?"

The attendant pushes the kewpie closer to Oak. "Uhm? Thanks for playing, but do me a favor and try out another game? Leave some for the rest of the folks!"

Oak rubs the back of her neck and pushes the kewpie back towards the attendant. "Ah... You can just give that to the next kid that loses at the booth. I just wanted to clown my friends here."

The gals start to walk away from the booth and wander aimlessly through the fairgrounds. Sunflower

turns to Oak. “Seriously, how can you shoot so well with your hair in front of your eye like that?”

“I had to make it fair to all of you somehow!”

Sequoia takes Sunflower’s hand again. “I’m actually pretty surprised on how well I did? I managed to hit like three of them. For never handling a weapon before, I think that’s pretty good.”

Hemlock laughs. “Better than the ‘legendary hero’ at any rate.”

Sunflower’s face goes red. “H-hey!”

“Haha, sorry, just teasing. Couldn’t help myself. Still, I’m surprised you didn’t do better.”

“That’s because I’ve only ever handled a sword. Guns and swords are completely different disciplines. I had to look at the three of you just to know how to properly hold it. I *have* to see your bullet catching act now that I’ve seen Oak in action.”

Oak’s ears perk and her tail twitches. “Well, we *were* gonna do it during Teufelnacht until they told us it was too dangerous. You’ll have to wait three weeks from now. We’re going to the capital in Hapke next. If your investigation leads you that way, catch us on the first night. We always do that performance first.”



The light goes from Sunflower's face and she wilts. "The investigation... right. I had forgotten."

Sequoia waves her free hand in front of Sunflower's face, dispelling the thought. "And you're still forgetting! You've forgotten right now. Poof, out your ears, there goes any thoughts about business for tonight. There'll be no talk of investigations, boards, or travel expenses!"

"Yes ma'am. Sequoia, have you had funnel cake yet?"

Sequoia's eyes roll skyward and her free hand goes to her chin. "Why would you make a cake shaped like that thing you use to pour oil?"

Sunflower chuckles. "I'll take that as a 'no'. Come on, let's get some. You'll love it, especially with your sweet tooth. Mind if it's just a Sequoia and I thing, gals?"

Lily mocks dismay. "Alas, how will we ever make it without you two competing against Oak and I."

"Haha, whatever. See ya soon, gals." Sequoia lets herself get led away by Sunflower and looks up at her. From a distance, the other three can hear her say "Shameless flirt."

And hear Sunflower reply "Idiot clown."

They can barely make out Sequoia sticking her tongue out at Sunflower and shouting "Psycho!" and hear their laughter as they disappear into the crowd.

Lily looks after them. "Warms your heart, don't it."

Oak sighs exaggeratingly. "Ah, to be young and in love."

Hemlock crosses her arms. "Let's just hope that Sunflower goes running off in the night with us instead of Coy running off with her."

Lily scoffs. "Pffft, Coy as a Crossguard? There's a lot of impossible things that have happened, but I think that one's truly impossible. Let's go get some coffees, I could use the pep and Sunflower looks like she *needs* it to keep from faceplanting in the grass."

Hemlock shakes her head. "The guild sure is running her ragged. Think they're punishing her for hanging out with us?"

Lily kicks at a pebble in front of her. "If they are then they're even bigger asses than I thought. Everyone deserves to have a life outside of work. Us, Sunflower, Crossguards, the workers here, everyone." They reach a booth selling coffee and put in an order for everyone, making Sunflower's a red eye.

Oak leans against the counter. "Maybe that'll be the push Sunflower needs."

Lily thanks the clerk and passes out the coffees, carrying Sequoia and Sunflower's in a styrofoam tray.

“Maybe. With the Guild pushing and Coy pulling, she’s bound to pop loose someday.”

“And then?”

Lily’s silent for a few moments. She takes a long sip of her coffee and is silent for a few moments longer. “We do have a couch, after all, and a bed that isn’t even being used. We have plenty of room.” She notices Hemlock’s eyes growing distant and kicks Hemlock’s boots gently. “Still not sure about her?”

Hemlock shakes her head. “It ain’t that. It’s just... things sure have changed a lot in the past two months. I kinda just got vertigo from it for a second. Used to just be the three of us, rambling around and barely scraping by, and now look at us, performing at Teufelnacht, talking about adding a *fifth* member, and not even needing to answer the Loser Board anymore. So far, anyways. Just... things changing so fast, y’know? It’s for the better, don’t get me wrong, but our lives in the past two months have changed more dramatically than the past four years put together.”

Oak twitches her tail and sips her coffee. “I know what you mean, but this should be the end of our expansion.”

Hemlock looks down at Oak and Lily. “Coy I understand, but Sunflower? Would it just be for Coy, is it right for the three of us?”

Lily looks down at the lid of her coffee for a bit. "... Yeah. I think so. Just listen to her music and see the joy on her face as she plays with that old synth. She's a totally different person than the person we thought we knew over the past six years. She's sliding right into our groove, and... I've actually come to enjoy having her around."

Oak just smiles. "She's definitely not the same person who has antagonized us the past six years. That was some caricature, a cartoon you find in some zine someone left at the Boar. This Sunflower's a real, living, wonderful person. Plus I wanna hear what more she can do with that synth. Yeah, it's right for us, unless you're still on the fence."

"No, I just wanted to hear you two say it too. It's selfish for the right reasons, and we're nothing if not selfish."

"Ain't that the truth." Oak nudges Lily and gestures forward with her coffee. "Look, over there. Isn't that..."

"...Coy and Sunny kissing? Sure is. Atta girl, Coy. Don't make a big deal of it." She waits until they're done kissing and shouts out to them. "HEY COY! SUNFLOWER! COFFEE!"

Sequoia and Sunflower walk hand in hand back to the girls, each taking a cup. "Didja miss us?"

Oak laughs. "No, we spotted you from a hundred yards out!"

Sequoia snickers. "Dork. Thanks for the coffee, Lil."

“Don’t mention it.” Lily gets a teasing grin on her face. “What’d you two get up to?”

Sequoia starts blushing. “Ah...”

Sunflower takes a long pull of her coffee. “Funnel cake, only I lost that duel.”

“Haha, no one can beat Coy at scarfing down a dish, especially a sweet. You gotta get on Hemlock’s level to even have a prayer. Let’s pound these coffees so we can hit up some more rides before it’s time to get ready.”

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The first show of Teufelnacht is a resounding success. Sequoia wasn’t allowed to do the trick with fire, as the theater manager decided it was too dangerous, so she painted a picture of fire on a large canvas and manipulated the painting as if it was actual fire. The crowd went wild for it. The gals were right too, adding a score to it really made it feel complete at long last. The missing piece wedged into the circle. Birch greets Sequoia immediately after the show and hurls even more questions at her than the girls asked that first time she ever told the story. She has about as much to add to the story now as she did then. Lily just laughs. After all these years, she finally gets to see an emotional display from her mother, and all it took was a story that should be impossible to tell. Sequoia promises to retell it with actual fire in a private viewing before they leave town. Zevon is,

for once, at a loss for words. He just stands by Birch and laughs and chimes in with a question here or there. Ficus and Stephen, predictably, don't know what to make of it. They settle on congratulating Oak on her performance and for figuring out "such vivid special effects", ignoring the play's subject matter.

Sunflower hangs back from all this. She and Hemlock strike the set while the others greet the crowd and family. Like all shows, Sunflower performs from backstage and doesn't press palms. It's what she's comfortable with. She may have gotten used to playing music for the gals, but that hasn't gotten her over her desire to distance herself from others. She breathes a sigh of relief each time Hemlock offers to strike the set with her. She puts on a mechanic's jumpsuit and a baseball cap tugged tight over her face, pulling her hair back and stuffing it in the cap. To avoid recognizability, of course. It takes awhile, but the crowd disperses back into the fairgrounds, eager to go on more rides and eat more food and play more games. The gals pack up the last of the set and pile into the van. They have the space until the fairgrounds close for the night, and they really ought to go back out into the fair. But like Lily said once, performing takes a lot of stamina, physically and mentally. Everyone's piled on the mattresses, Lily unlatching the lid of the donation box. It's crammed full of bills, even more so than Sequoia's debut. "Yes! Look at all this scratch! We'll have plenty for when we hit the road

*and* be able to donate a huge chunk! Goodbye Loser Board!”

Oak nudges Lily. “Don’t forget.”

“Oh right.” Lily does a quick calculation of the money and carves out a fifth of it and hands it to Sunflower. “Here’s your cut, Sunflower. It’s well earned.”

Sunflower simply takes two bills from the offered money and pushes the rest back. “This is more fair, I think. I’d be picking charity’s pocket if I took any more. I’ll put this money to good use, promise.”

Lily scoffs with a grin. “Pffft, listen to you all serious. ‘I vow to put this \$25 to good use.’”

Oak pleads up at Lily with huge eyes and mocks coughing. “Please, Miss Sunflower, I’m but a poor urchin \*cough\* and I need but one \*cough\* meal to make it through the day.”

Lily gives a deep, fake laugh. “Ha ha ha, of course, you little scamp. I’ll treat you to the most bountiful cuisine \$25 can get you. Come, let me regale you with tales of heroism, so you may be inspired and have hope.”

Sunflower falls backwards laughing. “You two are too much.”

Lily flicks a penny at Hemlock. “Going catting tonight?”

“Hm... Yeah, I think so.” Hemlock scoops up a few bills and a heavy note. “Oooh, lookit this, a hotel key. Gonna have me some fun tonight. You can have my bed tonight, Coy and Sunflower. I’ll just crash on the couch if I get home before you all get up.”

Sunflower’s eyes grow wide. “How did you-”

Hemlock gets up and heads towards the door. She grins over her shoulder. “Oh come on, it’s written all over your face. Later taters.” and heads out.

Oak laughs and lets herself flop into Lily’s lap. “We pretty much figured it out when we saw the two of you kissing. I just hope you don’t snore as much as Hemlock does.”

Lily scratches Oak’s head between her ears. “Seriously, we’ll move the couch outdoors and kick the two of you out if so.”

Sunflower laughs. “You won’t have to worry about that. I think. No one’s ever told me if I snore or not, now that I think of it.”

Sequoia pecks Sunflower’s cheek and gets up to head towards the couch. “I dunno about the three of you, but I’m too beat to walk the fairgrounds. Let’s not break our tradition of unwinding with a flick before going to bed. Sunflower on bottom, me atop her, Oak atop me, Lily atop her?”



Lily laughs. "Sunflower is the tallest but you'll be snapped in half by our weight!"

Poor Sunflower looks like she just realized what she was getting into. "Uhm?"

Sequoia shakes her head. "Hey, I've put on *some* meat on these bones. It'll be ok. Oak's just as tall as I am, it's no problem. Sorry Sunflower, we're aaaaall a package deal. Just let the tide take you, you'll enjoy it."

"I'll ah... take your advice."

"So what movie does everyone want to see?"

Lily raises her fists in the air. "Let's watch the one where the spaceship goes to Hell!"

Oak covers her face with her hands. "NOOO! Not unless you *want* to spend an hour smoothing out my tail. Let's watch the one about the guy who gets his truck stolen by a kung fu gang."

Sequoia puts a finger to her chin as she looks through the tapes. "Mmm... I dunno... Ooo, what about that really low budget weird one where those four dudes are on a spaceship-"

Sunflower pushes herself up and walks over to Sequoia. "-and they have to blow up planets that have a .000001% of causing a supernova and it has that beach ball alien? I love that one."

Sequoia's grinning madly as she looks over at Sunflower. "You know it?! Awesome, even better, let's do that one! C'mon over to the couch, I'll get it all set up for us. *Told* you this'll be a Teufelnacht to remember, Lil."

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Daylight streams into the van. It was just after the movie got done playing that they made their way back to the campsite. Sequoia's the first to stir. She turns to face Sunflower and... she's not there. She sits up and looks around. There's Lily and Oak, still asleep together on their bed. There's Hemlock, snoozing on the couch with her coat draped over her. But no Sunflower. She gets up and looks outside the door. No fire going, no Sunflower. She hangs her head. "Did... Did I push things too far too fast?" As she's about to go back inside, she notices a note stuck to the door addressed to her. She plucks it off the door and reads it.

"Dearest Sequoia, I'm sorry for leaving so suddenly. Last night was wonderful. Maybe the best night of my life. I wanted nothing more than to still be there when you woke up, but... I got a text from the guild. There's been a break in the case. I'm sorry, Sequoia. Forgive me? I have to settle this. Sadly, this lead is taking me out of town. I leave for Kartoffel this morning. By the time you wake up, I'll be on an airship. I... I don't know when I'll be able to see you again. How about this. I promise that no matter where I am in the case, no matter what else I have going on, I *will*

see you in October when you come back to Feymist. I swear. I sincerely hope it's sooner than that, but this way you for sure know the latest we'll see each other again. I live for that day. Please, don't be sad. Be the bright and vibrant spark you always are. Knowing you're continuing on in the way only you can will give me the strength to make it through each day. I already miss you terribly. I need to stop this letter while I still can. I'll see you as soon as I possibly can. ~Sunflower."

Sequoia hangs her head and drags herself back inside. She sniffs a few times and her shoulders heave with each sniff. After a few moments, she looks at the note again. A smile spreads across her face. She folds it into a paper airplane and sends it sailing down the length of the van. She grabs the milk crate full of cooking gear, the ingredients for breakfast from the fridge, and heads outside to begin the day, whistling the music from last night's show.

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The next show of Teufelnacht is The Marksman. Sequoia pulls out all the stops for the wolf glen scene, creating vivid, unearthly sights and sounds that makes the audience grow quiet, save for the occasional gasp. The rest of the shows go similarly. Sequoia was wrong, they got a standing ovation after each show. They don't hold back on the weirdness, and the crowd eats it up. You go to a show at a fair with certain expectations. A quality

performance, sure, but mundane. Something you'd see at any community theater production, maybe even a bit more hammy. Upset these expectations by giving them something to wonder and marvel at, and the experience is elevated even greater than if it wasn't at a fair. It's not just the special effects, altho it is largely that. It's the performances, too. The gal's aloof and strange way of acting betrays those baked in assumptions of what a fair show will be, and the crowd is delighted to have been wrong. Tips are the best they've ever experienced. That's not to say it's specifically because of their performances, it is a fair after all, but they allow their egos to inflate ever so slightly. Even the theater manager is pleased, asking if they'd be available next year and willing to share the stage with the Pomme Poivrée. Of course they are.

It's at the end of the last show, while they're packing up the set, that a man in a suit approaches. Sequoia thinks of Delbruk for just a moment before dismissing the thought. This guy's sharply dressed, but exudes none of the warmth of the way Delbruk wore his suit. He's carrying a black leather briefcase. He stands at the edge of the stage and clears his throat. "Excuse me, which of you is..." and he opens the suitcase and removes one of their posters they hung about town. "Sequoia Petticorn?" He asks this question, but stares right at Sequoia. She gets the impression that the question was simply a formality.

Sequoia dusts off her hands and looks down at him. "That's me, altho you seem to already know that. What's up, buttercup?"

"My name is Daniel Appleton. I represent the Chronorealism movie studio." He pulls a business card out of his pocket and proffers it up to Sequoia, who takes it. "Do you know of it?"

"Yeah, of course, we have several tapes from that studio. What can I do for you?"

"Do you have a few minutes to talk privately?"

Sequoia is taken aback. She looks at the other three. "Anything you have to say to me can be said in front of my family."

The man grimaces at that. "I don't intend to disrespect your... family. I just wanted to talk privately about... an opportunity."

Sequoia crosses her arms and sits down on the stage, looking down at him. "We're listening."

Daniel shakes his head. "Making it hard on me, eh? Kinda expected that. Please, just hear me out."

Lily walks up behind Sequoia and drops her hand on her head. "Don't sweat it, Coy. No need to raise your hackles. We gotta get the stuff in the van anyways. Why

don't you get a coffee from the fairgrounds and we'll meet you back here in a bit?"

Sequoia looks up at Lily. "Well... ok." She pushes herself off the stage, hopping down. She looks back up. "Promise this won't take long. See ya soon, gals." She looks up at the tall man next to her. "After you, Mr. Appleton."

"Daniel, please." They walk in silence onto the fairgrounds and to the coffee stand. Daniel pays for two coffees and motions to an unoccupied bench. They sit down and Daniel sets his coffee aside, putting his briefcase on his lap and opening it. "It seems you want this to be brief, so I'll be blunt. I have here a contract for three million dollars a year, for you."

Sequoia's hackles are raised. "W-what?"

"I'm a scout with the studio. I come to the festival every year to scout out potential talent, albeit for *acting* talent, but my dear, I have never seen anything like the... special effects you've been able to produce. You'd be working as a special effects director at the studio. Naturally, you'll be creating a lot of the... effects, but also directing them. This is a big opportunity, Sequoia."

"Call me Ms. Petticorn."

Daniel grimaces for a second. He can tell he's losing her. "Then I'll skip the formalities and go right to the hard sell. An opportunity like this comes once in a lifetime. For

most people, it never comes at all. But just a mere description of the effects you've made convinced the studio to draw up this contract. Three million dollars a year, Ms. Petticorn! With that money, you could fund... all that." and he waves back at the stage and van. "And keep your... family on the road and happy for as long as they wish. I can even ask the studio to grant them access to the grounds. You could be the greatest special effects director this industry... no, this world has ever seen! Don't you want to share your gift with the world? Don't you want to create something *special*, something to make everyone stand stupefied and in awe?"

Sequoia shakes her head. "I appreciate, and am even flattered, by the offer, but hard pass. I'm happy right where I am, doing what I'm doing now. Money was the wrong angle to take, and so was 'sharing my gift with the world'. What I do, I do for myself. The look on the faces of the crowd, the joy I bring people so directly, the sheer fun of performing with my family, that's all for me. I wouldn't trade it for every last cent in this world. Money has no value to me, and you can't offer me the same happiness that I already have. Sorry you went through all that effort for nothing. Glad you enjoyed the show, tho." and she stands up and waves without turning around. "Peace."

Daniel shoots up and puts his hand out. "Wait! Hold up!" and he jogs to catch up and stands in front of Sequoia.

Sequoia rolls her eyes and puts her hand on her hip. “Thirty seconds.”

“Ok ok, so money and fame, bad angles, I get it. You’re an artist, I respect that. But... What about security? And I’m not just talking about the security given by having a house and the stability financial security brings. I mean,” and his face darkens and he looks Sequoia dead in the eyes. “I mean security from the authorities. Like the Knights of Cecilia.”

Sequoia’s eyes grow wide and her expression hardens. “Are you trying to blackmail me, Mr. Appleton?”

He shrugs. “You say ‘blackmail’, I say ‘protect’.”

Sequoia shakes her head. She thinks about what Sunflower would say in this situation. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, Mr. Appleton. I’ve got a continental ID proving I’m just another victim of a ritual gone wrong. I don’t think you even deserve to hear that story. Or any of my stories. I may look weird, but I’m just as human as you are. All that on stage? That’s smoke and mirrors. Phantasmagoria, animatronics, that sorta thing. I don’t know what exactly you’re implying, but I don’t appreciate being threatened.” Sequoia lowers her voice. “Not that you have any way of proving anything to anyone anyways.”

Daniel crosses his arms. “I don’t need to. I just need to pick up the phone and dial.”



Sequoia stares him down. “Your thirty seconds are up, Mr. Appleton. Have a good evening.” And she walks back towards the van.

Daniel shouts after her “Keep my business card! Just in case! Offer still stands!” and he watches Sequoia disappear back into the crowd. He waits a long few moments before pulling his cellphone out of his pocket. He stares at it, flips it open, and dials a number. He stares at the phone for a full minute longer before flipping it closed and shaking his head. “Let the lion run free. Nature will catch up to her eventually, and then she’ll beg to be in the zoo.”

Sequoia reaches the van and enters it, the others waving lazily at her. She walks over to the mattress and sits down heavily upon it, not saying anything. Lily breaks the silence. “Yo Coy, what’d that nerd want?”

Sequoia shrugs. “What does anyone who already has more than they’ll ever need want? The impossible. Even more than they already have. To cage beauty and put it on display. To puff up their chest and brag about how deluded they are by dignity.” She reaches into her pocket and pulls out the business card. It bursts into flame and is ash in an instant. “Men like that are cowards. They talk a big game, but when it comes down to it, they won’t do anything that could potentially upset their ‘stable life’. We don’t have anything to worry about from him. C’mon gals.

Let's pile on the couch and put on a flick. Preferably one from an independent studio and distributor."

Lily laughs. "I know the perfect one. Stop me if you've heard this one before. These teenagers go into a cabin in the woods, see. Only to find... an ancient evil awaits them."

Sequoia grins. "Is it some malevolent demonic presence?"

Lily shakes her head. "Nope. It's older than that. It's being typecasted." She pulls Sequoia into her arms and kisses the top of her head. "And what fun is that?"

"Y'know Lil... that sounds just about perfect right now." Sequoia dwells on her conversation with the studio scout for as long as it took for his business card to go up in smoke.

## Chapter 20

Sequoia doesn't feel the same yearning and pull for Yama as she felt for Feymist. Once the festival is over, she's aching for the road again. They stop by Birch and Zevon's to say goodbye before heading back on the road. Seven stops between here and Brechdan. Three days at each stop, with a day of travel between each. The gals decided to keep a little more of the money from tips than usual.

Answering the Loser Board is losing its savor. That's not to say they still don't donate most of their earnings, but they expand the definition of "emergency funds". If they have to resort to the Loser Board, they decide, that's an emergency. Tips are good at each of their stops, too. It's not that they have a reputation following them, it's that they just do that good of a show each time. They reach Brechdan and set up, ready for another round of performances for the next month. Brechdan isn't quite as large as Yama, but it's a true city. All the parks and neighborhoods are indistinguishable from the rest of the city, unlike Yama with its sprawl that engulfs neighborhoods. They still don't compromise on playing outdoors and free for all. They play at the same outdoor stage as always, which thankfully gives a parking pass to traveling performers.

The next month passes by quickly. Sequoia explores a city, and is unimpressed. The other three share the same sentiment, but they do have a following here. They play shows, they hang out, they relax, they explore, they take in a show at a theater, they go to the movies, they work. Bits of life, bits of time. Sequoia looks over every crowd, looking for Sunflower. All through the entire visit, no sign of Sunflower. Sequoia kicks herself for not giving her the troupe's phone number. It's the last show of the last evening, after the show's over, that the theater manager, Brian, comes up to the gals. He clears his throat. "Scuse me... which one of you is Sequoia?"

The hair on Sequoia's neck raises. "That'd be me. Lemme guess, some agent type wants to talk to me. Or some KnoC."

Brian shakes his head. "No, nothing like that. We received a letter addressed to you at the theater's office. It arrived just this morning. I guess it's kinda hard to reach traveling performers, huh? I'm just glad I got to you girls before you left. Anyways, here." and he passes the envelope to Sequoia and walks off.

"A... A letter?" Sequoia's eyes grow wide and she grins wide. "It's gotta be from Sunflower! She's the only one who knows we're here and doesn't have our number!" She tears open the envelope and reads it, a smile still plastered on her face. "It is from Sunflower! She-" she continues reading and her face falls. The letter falls from her hands and Sequoia sinks to her knees.

"Coy?!" Oak runs over and throws her arms around her as Lily picks up the letter.

"Is it ok to read this letter aloud to the others, Coy?" Sequoia just nods numbly.

"My dearest Sequoia, I can only pray that I got this letter to you in time. If not, I hope that the theater manager is smart enough to forward it to the next venue. I... I can't make our October date. I've put together the last piece of the puzzle in this case. Kartoffel was the break I finally needed. Bergen *is* up to something. Or rather, if my

plan succeeds, by the time you read this it will be 'was' up to something. But... That plan requires me to make a difficult decision. One that will lead me out of your or anyone's reach. I... I have to negotiate with the generals. In the deep south. In person. I wish there was another way, but there simply isn't. I wish I could elaborate on Bergen's scheme, and why I need to do what I'm about to do, but... even if I wasn't paranoid that the Coalition would come for you for knowing, I would be devastated knowing how much you'd be worrying if you knew what I knew. But you have no need to worry. I'm seeing to that. I'm not doing this for the world. I'm doing this for you. To ensure you will always be free and happy and have two solid feet on the ground. Unless you levitate yourself, of course. Sorry, trying to lighten the mood. I *have* to do this. I *have* to do this. I'm sorry. In the immense distance of time, we will see each other again. If you go down south again after you grow old and pass on. I regret most of all that I won't be there to grow old with you. Keep me in your heart for awhile. You'll forever be in mine. ~Sunflower. PS: You'll forgive me if I name drop you, right?"

Lily sniffs. "Oh Coy... I... I don't know what to say..."

Sequoia puts her hands on her knees and pushes herself up. She wipes her eyes with her sleeve and gives a weak smile. "That dummy. She never listens to me. Ah well. She'll get it eventually."

"Coy?"

Sequoia shakes her head. "It's nothing. I'm ok, it's ok. Everything will be ok. I do want to keep that letter, tho." Sequoia takes the letter from Lily and pockets it. She wraps her arms around Oak and Hemlock and Lily slips her arm around Oak's other side. "C'mon, we have a set to strike and a road to hit. The show must go on."

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Time slips further away from us. After Brechdan, there's no more month-long tours until Feymist in October. They travel town to town in each country, spending a week at a town before moving on. Sequoia gets to finally swim in the ocean, and predictably she gets punch drunk from the waves and goes in for more each time. They play for small villages, towns, cities, even in the middle of a forest for one show. They cycle through all the plays they know and they invent new ones on the spot and try them out. Sometimes, they bomb. Other times, they get a standing ovation. They live their lives as they see fit, and the momentum they've had since the last time they were in Feymist carries them forward. Life doesn't exactly become predictable and stable, but it does become comfortable. Sequoia adjusts to her new normal and loves every second of it. She takes a page from Birch's book and takes a photograph of the one thing, or person, or place that speaks to her the most about a place and keeps it in a portfolio in the van. A thatched hut, a person

nursing a child, some stages. Snapshots that only have meaning to one person, but a story behind every one.

It's these things that make up a person's life. It's not the events, it's not the destinations, it's the conversations along the way, the small moments that stick in your memory. It's the weather during a particular week, the way you take your meals, the idiosyncrasies of the people around you. It's a dream you had once, it's a radio station you love to listen to, it's the time you finally beat your friends at cards. It's the ache you feel being away from home, and it's the excitement you feel when you return.

It's mid-October when Sequoia feels that particular part of life. It's their first night back in Feymist, their first night back on the campground where she came home for the first time. They took dinner at The Sweaty Boar Tavern and dipped their feet in the ocean. They dug a pit in the sand and lit a bonfire and told stories. Of course they did. By Sequoia's request, they decide to stay in Feymist for quite awhile. Through the new year, then off again. That means they'll be back in time for summer, with the negotiating power to put on shows their own way. The Chamber of Commerce will just have to deal, or they'll put on the shows out in the forest anyways. Their crowds will come regardless. They'll finally get to see Feymist from the other side, the side where everything is open. New people to meet, new connections to form. Sure, that means playing for tourists, but that just means they'll take stories

of the plays back home with them. The locals will come for them regardless. They're laughing and talking on the trail leading from town back to the campsite when the sound of a twig snapping loudly, pointedly, deliberately in their direction comes from the woods off to the side of them. Sequoia stops in her tracks. It takes a moment for the others to notice and they turn around. Sequoia rubs the back of her neck and smiles. "Hey gals, why don't you go on ahead. I'll catch up in a few minutes."

Hemlock folds her arms in front of her. "Oh? Is everything ok?"

Sequoia laughs. "How can it be anything else? I promised an old friend I'd wait for her here. I wanna stare up at the stars and let her catch up."

The other three all look at each other for a long few moments and nod. Hemlock strokes her chin. "Hm... You seem ready."

"Ready? Ready for what?"

Oak shrugs in an exaggerated manner. "I dunno... Well, I guess there's no harm."

"Is it my audition? Cuz we're kinda far past that now."

Lily flashes a sly grin and shakes her head. "Nah, nothing like that. Y'see, there's a secret about the troupe we haven't told you yet. We weren't sure you were ready to



know it, but yeah, you're ready. Don't worry, it's quick. We're not gonna keep your friend waiting."

Oak tugs on the hair at the nape of her neck. "Y'see... People are selfish, y'know? We can't help it, it's in our nature. Even weirdos like us can't help but be a little selfish. Ok, a lot selfish."

Hemlock folds her arms in front of her. "It's why we came up with the Once A Lifetime Selfish Veto Override, so we can get that selfishness outta the way without worry."

Sequoia puts a hand to her chin and looks up at the stars. "Once A Lifetime Selfish Veto Override?"

Lily nods. "Yeah! Being an equal member of the troupe, you're entitled to one thing and one thing only your whole life that you really really want that the others aren't allowed to say no to, so long as it doesn't fundamentally change the nature of the troupe, harm anyone, or force anyone to do something that they don't wanna do. No one can even use their Once A Lifetime Veto Override to undo yours! So if there's something you really want, more than anything in the world, do it, and tell us after. We'll accept your decision with open hearts and open arms."

Sequoia smiles warmly and looks down at her shoes. "Thanks gals. I'll let you know when I've made mine." The

other three turn to walk away and Sequoia calls out to them. "Hey! What'd the three of you do with yours?"

Lily turns around and shrugs. "Who can keep track? Remembering tiny details is for responsible people, not us. There's one more thing I need to tell you. It's important, but not very helpful. Would you like to hear it?"

"No, would I like to hear something very important but not very helpful, craw haw haw."

Lily giggles for a moment, before her face turns serious. She looks out in the direction of the twig snapping. "You don't need to rewrite the past. Your pen's already on the present. Anything can be forgiven, all you need to do is write." Lily turns back to Sequoia. "Sorry about that! You know how I get. We'll see you soon, ok?"

Oak waves. "See ya in a few, Coy!" She turns to walk with the others, walks a distance then turns around, cupping her hands around her mouth. "And bring your friend! If she's not too shy! We love meeting new people!"

Hemlock puts her arms around Lily and Oak and Sequoia can faintly make out her saying "I'm using my override now to tell the octopus story." and then the other two saying simultaneously "Again? That's like the tenth time!" and all of them laughing.

Sequoia shakes her head and laughs. She just stands there for a few moments, looking up at the stars. She

keeps her ears perked, and can hear the heavy steps of boots on leaf litter. Emerging out of the woods and shadows is... Well, she sorta looks like Sunflower. Same shape, same height, same build, same clothing even, and that sword in its sheath *definitely* looks familiar, but then Sequoia notices the horns, longer than her own and more prominent, the spaded tail swinging behind her, her bright yellow irises shining through the dark of night, and the unnatural redness of her skin. Matching Sequoia's own, in fact. But then Sequoia hears her voice. "Good evening, Sequoia." Sequoia starts running towards her as fast as she can. "Those three really are spec-GACKT!" This time Sunflower really is bowled over, and Sequoia pins her shoulder to the forest floor.

"You're back! You're solid! I.. I believed you'd find a way. Every minute of every hour of every day, with my whole heart. Not a day passed where I didn't sit outside the van, clutching that metal sunflower I made, hoping you'd come by. I knew you'd keep your promise." Tears start falling from Sequoia's eyes and onto Sunflower's face. "I..." Sequoia wipes her eyes and starts giggling. "You look like Hell, Sunflower."

Sunflower just stares up at her, wide eyed, then starts laughing madly. "That... *That's* what you say?! After all these months! You're horrible! I can't believe you!"

Sequoia closes her eyes and tries to hold back the tears. "There it is. That's the laugh I've waited for these

past few months. It's even more wonderful to hear than I remember." She grabs one of Sunflower's horns and tugs gently. "What's all this? Did you really miss me that much?"

Sunflower smiles up at her. "Idiot clown."

Sequoia grins down at her. "Psycho." She rolls off Sunflower and sits down next to her, Sunflower sitting up and wrapping her arm around her shoulders.

Sunflower looks down at Sequoia, a serious look on her face. "Sequoia... How long have you known the Business District doesn't exist."

"Duh. I've always known."

Sunflower laughs. "I should've guessed. It's because of the belief, isn't it. That's why you haven't told the others. That's why you keep telling those jokes and stories about Hell."

Sequoia nods. "Of course it is. A story is just a story, Sunflower, it doesn't need to be true to be fascinating. They themselves taught me that. I love them dearly but... If anyone topside besides us knew that 'Hell' is as it was in the beginning, the belief in 'Hell' would disappear and Cecilia would know we never even *started* obeying her rules. That's the point of telling Mahog's story, to fool Cecilia into thinking she won in the end. She should've seen it coming. With enough effort and time, eventually

even the Knowledge will erode away. Those three are proof it's happening before our very eyes. Then, we're free to believe whatever we want." Sequoia gives a short but deep laugh. "So don't let that cat out of the bag, ok? Especially to Oak! She'd be devastated if she knew Hemlock was right! Well, mostly anyways."

Sunflower giggles, then her face grows more serious. "Sequoia... I talked to Bergen before I went... down. He said-"

Sequoia shakes her head. "Nothing important. Just a shitty story by a shittier man. Didn't I tell you before? Everything's a coincidence, purpose and meaning are delusions. I'm here because I wanted to be here. I wanted to be here to walk in love with these three so bad that it happened. That's all. Hemlock once told me, people can say whatever they want, but that doesn't make it true. She also told me that everyone's got it all wrong, it's not 'reality is what you make of it, but you define reality. Probably a poor translation by some asshole with too many brains and not enough heart.' She's much wiser than anyone thinks. Probably already figured out the truth of the belief and is the only topsider Cecilia can't see. Playing the fool is a lot of fun, y'know."

Sunflower laughs. "You would know. I wouldn't be surprised if you're right. All these years, all she and the others have been doing is showing me the absurdity and beauty of life. I'm just sorry it took me so long to listen."

They're quiet for a long few moments before Sunflower speaks again. "I spoke to Mahogany while I was down there."

Sequoia snickers. "Still not shortening names, Sunflower? I'll admit, it has a better ring to it than Mahog. How is the old crow anyways?"

Sunflower hangs her head sadly and shakes it. "Impossible to tell. They wanted me to tell you that they've never been proud of anything they've created, except you."

Sequoia laughs and rolls her eyes. "Gawd, how embarrassing. Are everyone's parents like that? What'd they really want you to tell me, tho."

Sunflower smiles and shakes her head. "I'll never figure out how you do that. They wanted me to give you this letter." She goes to reach in her jacket but Sequoia puts her hand over her arm.

"It can wait. We have our whole lives ahead of us but right now we only have this moment. Let's make the most of it." They both look at the stars for a solid minute. Sequoia speaks softly. "...Do you remember when we first met?"

"I'll never forget, demon."

Sequoia snorts. "You're one to talk. So. Are you ready?"

Sunflower reaches to her belt and unhooks the sheath and sword from it. She then reaches into her coat's breast pocket and takes out a gold badge depicting the hilt and crossguard of a sword. She holds them loosely in her hand in front of Sequoia. "If you'll do the honors."

There's an upwards slide whistle sound as the sword and badge raise quickly into the sky. Sequoia leans her head against Sunflower's side and burrows into the crook of her arm. "I hope it wasn't some sort of weapon of legend or anything."

Sunflower just looks up, tracking them as they continue to rise. "Some legends need to fade. ... .. Uhm. You know there's seventy-five or so miles to go, right. At that speed we'll be here til Hell boils over. More."

Sequoia laughs. "Yeah, but it'll pick up velocity soon. It just needs to get started." The upwards slide whistle fades, and in a blink of an eye, the sword and badge are less than just another pinpoint of light in the sky. "Aaaaand there. Toldja. Two times is more than enough, girly. Time to let someone else pick up the slack. You've earned this happiness. We have our little world, and everyone else has theirs. We don't need saving anymore."

Sunflower stands up and dusts herself off, Sequoia following suit. They face each other and Sunflower gets another serious look on her face. "There's just one thing, Sequoia. I know it's not important, and I know it doesn't

really matter in the end, but..." Sunflower clutches her hair and tugs on it. "But it's been killing me for ages and no one in Hell would tell me! Did Cecilia create the world or not?!"

Sequoia laughs brightly. "What good is a story if all the mysteries are spelled out for you? Hm... Well, there's still a few left and it seems like you're ready to play nice now. I guess I can tell you. Yes. Absolutely 100% she is a goddess who created the world and every inert and organic thing upon, over, and under it, except us." Sequoia shrugs, her grin widening. "But then, so did the old gods. And gods long forgotten. And gods yet to come. Our only beef from the start was that she wouldn't let us play in her playground like everyone else would. The rest of the story is what we in the biz call 'world building'."

Sunflower just grins. "We really are the most awful little shitheads, aren't we."

"The worst. That's why we're gonna have so much fun together. It's in our nature." Sequoia takes Sunflower's hand and tugs her towards camp. "C'mon Sunflower. We can't wait to see what kinda story you wanna write. Just so you know, as the newest member of the troupe, you'll have to sleep next to Hemlock. It's but the smallest part of our hazing tradition. But don't worry, we'll sleep in the center and she's all the way to the side. I'll protect your delicate ears."



They walk slowly, taking their time under the full moon's light. "We'll be giving Lily and Oak a run for their money. Poor Hemlock."

"Sorry, Sunflower, we're aaaaall a package deal, Hemlock included. Sorry, we're gross. That doesn't mean we have to always share. All people are selfish, and demons are just another type of person. But don't worry, there's always an awkward getting to know each other phase. We have plenty of time to ourselves."

"I wouldn't have it any other way." Sunflower stops walking, but holds onto Sequoia's hand, grasping it firmly, then tugs on it, bringing Sequoia close to her. "Hey, Coy?"

Sequoia's eyes grow wide, and the tears return. "Yes, Sunny?"

Sunny cups Coy's cheek in her hand and smiles warmly. "Why don't we just use these names for each other? When we feel like it, anyways."

Coy nods, smiling as wide as her eyes. "I'd like that."

Even Sunny's eyes start watering. She doesn't even try to stop the dams. "I love you Coy. You're the reason I was able to make it back at all. I kept pushing and pushing, until it was like your hand was pulling me through."

"Because it was. That's the power of love. Love is the only thing that can dissolve the division between reality and dreams. In the face of its onslaught, belief and

knowledge are but leaves scattered on an empty street. Those three aren't the only ones I came up here to walk in love with. I love you Sunny." and they kiss. To describe their kiss would be pointless. We could say it's pure, long, passionate, but those are just words. They are totally disconnected from the act itself. "Let's you and I walk together in the present, Sunny and... just see where the tide takes us."

"Nothing on Earth would make me happier."

"'Nothing'? Not 'few things'?"

Sunny smiles. "Nothing."

"That makes five of us. Now then, stop me if you've heard this one, Sunny. There was once this mischievous race of lil shithead sprites called demons..." They walk hand in hand, into the clearing where they've made camp, Lily and Oak uncharacteristically hanging on Hemlock's every word, and Sunny and Coy take a seat nearby, no one making a big deal of it at all. Later, once the fire's died naturally, they all go home.