

Old Code

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English

The Colorado College

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Bachelor of Arts

By

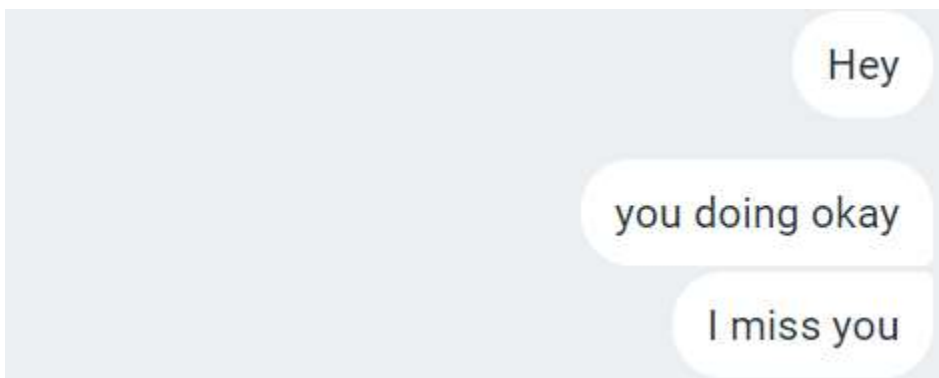
Karl F. Guenther II

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edge of the bed. It's my phone, the case still wet with tears. I sniff, clearing out the sad mucus and flip it over. Probably about her funeral again. Or, maybe it's from Firio.

The notification reads "HEYYYYYYYY, back from my aunt's funeral, 😊 ready to have fun the rest of the summer and get back to my beach bod and full essential oil collection!!!!!! Now, I loved..." I just stop reading. Screw whatever second or once removed aunt that is. I don't hit the "read more" button. No like, Unfollowed. Fuck bearing plants aren't growing on my land anymore. They haven't since her funeral.

No. Not going any further with That Shit™. I open the note app to "Song Ideas" and type in "*An impossible Staring Contest*" Probably will be rejected by Tommy, but whatever. Who cares if I'm always "too wordy?" Or if I talk too fast or whatever. Or... Oh yeah. He's gone. I force myself to breathe. It's fine. I wish Firio were here, or I was there, or anything but this. I look down at my phone. No new texts from him. Fuck, He's probably fine, but still. I send a couple texts.



I also notice a seven by my email app. No. I'm not dealing with that lawyer stuff today. You already shoved me here. I'm not dealing with any more of your shit.

I ooze off the bed. Basic-ass cream-colored sheets drag along with me. Nope. No fucks to give. I'll deal with making the bed later. Actually, Grandpa will probably have to deal with it. No. His fuck fields are probably pretty barren as well. All of them have been ripped out by his wife pass- Nooo. You're not getting me this time, brain.

I complete my descent to the thick shag carpet as my heavy combat boots thump on the floor. I lay facedown in the noodles of cloth. It's even hotter than the bed somehow. Whatever. I push up to a plank position and step up to stand. Barely able to do one, when even last week I could bust out twenty-five of them no problem. God. I'm going to have to figure out how the hell to work out here, or I'll go even crazier than I am now. Or maybe I've already gone mad and this is the mental hospital. Nah. All of this single-color shit would be enough to drive somebody crazy, like that top 30 station back at home. 104.1 the gum (popping sound effect). If I can count the number of songs on your, top 30, station, on a whole month, on my fingers, you, as a DJ, fucked up your one job. Floorboards creak underneath the carpet as I walk out of the room.

In the kitchen, Ancient appliances and linoleum surround and entrap me in the sixties. I spot my reflection in the glass of the oven, short, waif-y face, flat chin-length hair, resting bitch face, barely any boobs, and torn-up combat

boots. At least I have the leather jacket and baggy cargo pants covering everything else. I look away and open the cupboard to the pots and pans. They don't shine. Probably haven't since I was born. I tap a fingernail on one of them. It tings back. The sound is tinny but workable. I might resort to these if Mom and Dad still don't wanna send over a drum set, or at least my Cajon.

So easy to fit in the three suitcases of clothes and makeup for a single-day funeral but nooo we don't have space for a travel drum set. A set of bowling balls is good but of course it'll be waaay too heavy to carry even a drumming box with us. Selfish asshats, you think I need to change? Reevaluate my life, away from everything? Liars. Just because you say that kind of bullshit doesn't mean I'll believe you at all. Look in the fucking mirror. You take away your daughter's fairly earned concert money! Greedy fuckers!

Maybe that's why they won't even ship it. They aren't willing to spend the twenty bucks. Would be pretty convenient to say that drumming's one of the things I need to separate from as well. Wow, brilliant plan, Moriarty, but Sherlock's on your case. First, you separate me from my friends, then drive me insane without access to the one thing that isn't shit in this entire world.

This isn't the parenting that will get you a pretty pink princess. If you wanted that, you should have bought a barbie doll! But now Pandora's Box is open, and you have to deal with me and what your inattention did, and despite that my dreams are still alive. I'm still fucking amazing at music! My band's

gotten thousands of followers! Just let me take care of myself like you've forced me to do up to this point!

Of course, those kinds of people, adults feeling greedy and entitled to their sale screwed it up.

I feel myself fall back into that line again. First, there's the asshole who sold a transphobic kid a fucking gun. Then the slimy, lying lawyers trying to make the trial long and get money off of me, then throw me in jail. Then, the parents who fucked him up in the first place. Just. I wish I could live in an apartment with the band... Just Firio now.

Fuck, people are just attacking me every way they can. It feels like the entire world is going against me. I feel heat behind my eyes and my throat seizes up. No! Breathe. Use the rhythm. Calm down. In, out. In, out. In, out. In... out...

I take one last deep breath and let it out a sigh, whatever. I'll deal with this bullshit later. I close the cupboard door and move back to the original goal. Readjusting my cargo pants, I stand up. Would Grandpa call it cute if I drummed on the pans or just stare? And not thinking about that. I step out of the kitchen back into the living room. Three "antique" couches, a bookshelf, and a dresser with an old-timey radio greet me. They stare at me like geriatric children waiting to be entertained. Well, I'm not going to tell them a bedtime story or deal with their racist jokes today.

I glance at the absurd number of photos lines and lines of my extended family stare back. My eyes glaze over at the horde of faces. Ugh. Each of them smiles with a sickening insincerity, something's wrong with how their eyes squint. I notice at my own face. Ugly. Especially when I was younger. There are abundant photos of me until twelve and a half or thirteen. Then they thin out. Also, it helped that Mom and Dad stopped caring right around then, and we didn't go on vacations anymore. I scan the rows further for anything to catch my eye. Nope, all just wild colors, Disney too many times, and white teeth. My smile is still present but barely in those later ones. Just got tired of everyone ruining a good time by stopping to make sure the light's right and that we don't have shmoo on our faces. Additionally, my pink clothes pink become green, blue, and black, as I stop shopping with my parents and go with people who actually know my life. Mommy and daddy never wanted their little girl to grow up and dress any different. Well guess what, she's sixteen and able to drive out of your bullshit bog.

Still nothing's distracting enough to keep my mind on it for more than a minute. I eye the bookshelf, kneeling in front of it and glance over the titles, *Timeless Garden Design*, *Rural Landscaping*, *Interior Design for Dummies*, and *Edible Gardening*. After the eighth book about plant care, I give up on the hope of some magical book like, *101 ways to Tell Your Parents to Shove off*, or *How to Escape Your Grandfather's House and Get Back to Your Real Life*, or even *Stuff*

NOT Completely Boring. I pull out one of the hardcovers and rap on the front. Maybe. Not too loud but not a full enough sound.

I sigh and glance around the room. Still nothing but the staring photos. Over the silent creaking of the house, I hear a quiet snoring and glance around the armoire. Grandpa's blue-white bedroom door is closed. The snoring from behind that door's absolutely daring paint job reminds me that he's not mute.

I turn back to the living room, noticing a splash of black and white between the bookcase and pile of picture frames crowded around the radio.

It almost blends in with the drab whites, grays, and creams of the room, but the dark sharpness of the photos pop against the plainness. They're all photos of Grandma. Only a few are taken in color, but they all show a practiced eye's work. They look great, and Grandma when she was young... Well, she's very pretty. I pick one up from the center of the stack. She's staring straight into the lens, her dark, wavy hair twisted into four tubes, three on top of her head, while one falls down the side. Not a style I've seen before. I pull at my own brown hair. Maybe I should grow mine out and try it? Nah. Thin eyebrows that look better on her than me arch at the camera, as if to ask, "do you like what you see?" But there are wrinkles of stress, little bags poke out from the makeup under her eyes, they shimmer with a painful knowledge, but the expression says she's put that way behind and living for now. The picture blurs. No everything blurs. Why the fuck did I have to do some kind of art analysis on my dead grandma's photo? I wipe away moisture from my eyes and look back

to the shrine, moving my hand to place the picture back where it was, and see that there's a dark wooden box. The thing it was resting on. I pick it up, placing the photo of grandma where the box was, ruining the centerpiece of the shrine, but that's whatever. The box fits well in my hands, not big, but it's shaped a lot like a mini cajon. I rap my knuckles against the wood. It knocks well. Though, another wooden sound knocks back from inside it. I look on the back. There's a brass latch with a lock on it, something really old, but the key's inside the lock, just ready for me to turn it. I stop staring and thump my way back into my room.

I close the door and sit down against it, setting the dark wooden box down on the carpet. The wood clashes with the rest of the room. The stuffy white oldness fights against the unopened and mysterious container. I stare at it for a second, barely any decoration. The only things I can find are the joints. They're an even darker wood, tracing their way around the edges of the box, starting and ending with diagonal lines into the next corner. There are only a couple brass swingy things, what's the word for them. Starts with an H. Whatever, they're small and the same color as the lock thing, attached to the top and bottom with two nails. I knock my knuckles on the top like a door. It creates that satisfying clack again. But a little messed up by the lock hitting back into the wood. Ugh - no, not taking it off yet. Let's savor it. Ha, screw you marshmallow test. I can save things for later. I instead pull up on the lock and drop it against the wood. It creates another clack, different this time. I pick the

whole box up, and it tips something inside, which settles with a little pap. The inside must be cushioned, or it's something soft in there. No. Not opening it still. Instead I knock on one of the other sides. Clack. Okay, deeper, nice, sounds good. Edge. Bap. I set it down again and start out with the classic "funky drummer" beat. Then a boom clap. It starts evolving, creating a fun rhythm, striking with my palm, knuckles, and lock on all sides, even tipping the insides for something else. Yes! This is what I needed. Hell yeah! I keep it going, continuing for a few minutes before it peters out.

Okay, fine. I turn the key in the lock. It doesn't pop open right away, I yank at the box of the lock, pulling it out from the bar. I wiggle it a couple times and it finally comes loose. I take the shackle off and flip the latch up. I don't open the lid, though. No, let's guess what's in there first. Probably some old photos or a notebook. Maybe a diary of hers. A necklace or her wedding ring? Nah, has to be tippable, not shakable. All right. Diary it is.

I open the lid.

Turns out I was wrong. It's one of those Morse code thingies. Telegraph. That's it. There's a notebook and pamphlet too.

The inside is lined with that fuzzy purple material they put on displays sometimes. I dump the contents out onto the carpet. The telegraph clicks as it hits the floor. I pick it up by the wooden base and inspect it. It has a black wooden knob on a long metal bar, attached to a bunch of metal wires and pieces. Though, there's no plug or battery pack. Practice one? Broken?

Whatever. I click it a couple times. Wonder how it makes that sound. I tap it a few more times. There are a pair of metal bars that hit end-to-end next to the fulcrum. Huh. Maybe add something like that for the drum set later. Sounds kinda like a typewriter click. Maybe get a typewriter too. I take out my phone and type into the “save up to buy” list “typewriter for drumming.” I sigh. Yeah, it’s unlikely I ever get any of these things. Still, I have to be hopeful somewhere in my life.

I put that down and pick up the notebook. It’s pretty small and old, really ratty and used. The cover has one of those name windows on it. MCWR Communications Agnes McNeil. Grandma? First name matches. Must be her maiden name. I open to the first page. It’s a bunch of dashes and dots - dits and dahs with German, I think, writing underneath. It’s like what Grandma did. - No. Don’t. Don’t think of her. Just focus on the code it’s not hers. It’s like those old secret messages from elementary school, paper plane messages and hidden codes that only the band knew... I hope they’re still around for me when I get back.

No, of course they will. We’re not ever abandoning each other. We got through that bastard and the trial. We’re all in this for good; I am at least. I just have to figure out a way to talk to them that my parents can’t see. Let’s get back to the notebook.

I look at the notebook, see if I can recognize any of the letters. Dit dit dah dah dah dit dit dit. Nope. Fuck. It’s almost there. I remember T is just a dah

and e's just a dit. I'll just have to figure it out. I take a look at the pamphlet; it has a smiling woman on it. "Join the Communications Corps! Help the men on the front lines know what's going on!" I open it up. There's a translation of Morse. Sweet! Suppose studying Morse isn't the worst thing to do with my loads of free time.

I take a pen and notebook out of my backpack and start studying, remembering all the while the old days back first learning it. Nope. Actually, not doing that. Just going to relearn Morse Code. Still... I'll just deal with whatever comes.

Chapter 2

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I remember when I first learned Morse.

I dragged grandma through the door of my fourth-grade classroom, the one with Tommy Malloy. Fuck him. He looked at me like a little angel, but that blonde hair hid blue eyes filled with the malice attained by a young boy only for a girl he liked. Fuck him. He was wearing stripes that day. He knew I hated stripes.

I sat down next to Fiona. She had pants on that day and a superhero T-shirt. Unlike all the other girls, she didn't have long hair. That was cool. We bumped fists, like we always did.

Teacher talked about World War II and how we needed a way to talk in a secret code. When she asked its name, Tommy and I raised our hands at the same time, but the teacher called on Tommy. She always called on him first. He yelled out that he learned it on TV, horse code. He learned everything from TV, the TV on the wall, the TV on the desk, the TV in his mom's purse she gave him

when he was being annoying. He still didn't get that they had different names. Everything with a screen was a TV to that idiot. And that dumbass could never get anything he "learned on TV" right. Still, Teacher commended him.

Fiona always noticed when I got irritated this time she put her hand on my shoulder and showed me a picture she drew of Tommy dressed in a garbage can with stink lines coming out of it. I grinned and she leaned back, acting all cool. The teacher interrupted.

"Oh, you're really close, Tommy, it's Morse code, named after its creator Samuel Morse."

Oh, and fuck her too. Teacher was always encouraging him, even though I was smarter. Bullshit.

"Now, we have someone here to teach you Morse code, Mrs. Earnst, Patricia's grandmother!" Teacher announced like a gameshow hostess.

We all clapped, and Grandma stood up from the corner where she was sitting.

Grandma taught us about telegraphs and how they worked, don't remember shit about that. I was too pissed at Tommy trying to show off. Then she started tapping. I immediately perked up at the rhythm. Grandma showed us the letters tapping them out, then combining them into words, then words into pangrams, sentences with all the letters in them, to help remember how to tap everything. The sentences were really long, but I was already taking drum lessons and got the rhythms easy. I could tap faster than anyone and could

translate more accurately too. Tommy threw a fit and said that I was cheating, that Grandma had taught me already. Fuck you, Tommy you're just an entitled idiot with rich parents who didn't care. My rich parents at least cared *then*. Teacher pulled me aside after he started screaming that his dad was going to get me fired from class. She wanted me to stop showing off and let everyone else get a chance. Yeah, fuck that. I hate school.

Grandma took me home after school that day and told me she was proud of me and how well I did. She agreed with me that Tommy was a meanie-face and that I needed to keep doing what I did, no matter what Teacher said.

"In fact, there's one secret that I didn't teach anyone else."

"Yeah! What is it?" I asked, instantly interested. I stared up to her grey hair covering everything down to her sweater.

Grandma stopped the car in our driveway. "I'm going to teach you my favorite pangram. It's really long with a lot of new words. Are you ready?"

"Yeah!"

There's a hot wetness in my eyes as I sit with her telegraph. My boots hang over the side of the bed, off of the sheets. The sun streams through the window as I let myself think about her and just wish for someone to distract me from all of this. I tap out the phrase.

... .-- / --- ..- / -... ..- .- .-. .- / --:- ..- .- .- - --- / .--- ..- ..- .- . / -- .-- / ...- --

- .--

Sphinx of black quartz judge my vow

There's a shuffling noise in the other room. I jerk up and notice the mess and invasion of Grandma's life I've made.

The bed is littered with ornate pillows, silver and gold flowers embroidered on many of them. A dark wooden box lies with a backpack; both of their contents spill onto the carpet. *Fahrenheit 451* sits discarded on the side of the bed, while I lay with my pencil and notebook. There's also the leather book containing the Morse I was translating, a clear invasion into my grandma's personal life. Nope, can't let him see any of this.

I scramble out of the bed and shove everything in my pack that I can. Clothes spill out, but I focus on hiding the box and notebook. A pit opens up below my ribs, spreading through my body. I zip up the bag and gently throw it to the side, making as little noise as I can. Pants, shorts, t-shirts, whatever, laze in front of me. I shove them under my bed, wrinkling everything into a pile, and cram some straggling socks and underwear. The bed creaks a little too loud when I jump back on, shoving off too firm pillows and snagging *Fahrenheit 451*. I open to the end and pull it in front of my face.

I breathe for a second.

A seventy-something year old man with a square jowly jaw and tiny spectacles opens the door. His white shirt and tan trousers, held up by suspenders, fit right in with the age of the rest of the room. I put the book to the side.

“Hey Grandpa.”

“Uh,” he stammers, glancing down at my boots halfway on the bed, “Hello Patricia. How is your reading going?”

“It’s all right,” I reply, “Almost done.”

“Well, I was planning on visiting some friends of mine, Greg and Judy. Would you want to come with?” He asks. There’s a dumb hopeful smile on his face, as if he hasn’t already realized that I don’t fucking want to be here. Knew I was good at lying to adults but shit. Better than I thought.

I plaster a smile on my face. “Sure, can I finish the book first? I only have a few pages left.”

“That sounds wonderful. I was planning to have some tea before going anyway.” He gives a dopey grin. Well glad he’s happy, I suppose.

He continues “No need to hurry while this old man’s around. Feel free to take your time. I’m practically a snail!”

I exhale. LOL.

“Thanks Grandpa.”

His “zany” smile fades. “All righty. Have a fun time with your book! I’ll be back in a jiffy with some wonderful lavender green tea. Loose leaf!” He always emphasizes the loose leaf, as if that’s supposed to mean something. He walks out whistling a bouncy tune.

Grandpa doesn’t close the door behind him. I get up and latch onto the half-recognized tune. It’s an older jazzy style. He mutter-sings out “Lets face the

music and Bwaaa da-da-da-da-daa” I grimace. Couldn’t even have the decency to complete the chorus. I slide door shut, letting the rhythm go. Breathe in deep. Let it out. Come back to now. My hands slow their shaking. I’m okay. Don’t know why I’m so scared of him finding out. I doubt he’d do anything. I shouldn’t care. Hell, he might have even kicked me out and back home, best punishment ever.

There’s still a hole where my stomach should be.

Maybe he would just want her to himself. - No. Stop thinking of that! Just - I’ll deal with it later.

I sit down in front of the bed, back leaning on the baseboard, boots still off the sheets. I reach for the bag and open it. The box with that old telegraph hides underneath half-folded clothes. I pull the box toward me and take the telegraph out. There’s a long lever with a button-ish knob on the end attached to the wood. I grab the knob and use the lever. It returns with little clicks.

The pit still hasn’t left my abdomen, but it’s fading. I put all of Grandma’s stuff away into the box and hide it in the bottom of my bag, stacking clothes on top. I look around the room for anything I might have missed. The embroidered pillows are scattered everywhere. Did Grandpa notice? He had to; is he that blind now? Why didn’t he say anything?

My brain slows to molasses. Thoughts come. Slowly they slide in and slurp out, a goo of questions.

He’s close to eighty years old. People live to ninety these days, right?

But there could always be an accident.

But he lives in a one-story house with nothing heavy or too sharp. (I hate that I'm thinking of him like a toddler.)

When is he going to stop walking? I don't know. I don't want to think of that.

What about a nursing home?

My eyes get hot.

When is he going to die too?

Wetness drips down my face, rolling into my mouth. I don't know if I taste the salt.

Why the fuck do I care.

Maybe that's why Mom and Dad want me to spend the Summer with him.

No! Fuck. They don't care about anyone but themselves! They want to get me out of their hair! But why here? There are so many other places to throw me! Why would they want me to be here when he dies?

His will! His money! Those greedy assholes! Fuck, how the hell would they do this to him? Grandpa is a nice, okay old man! Fuck! Fuck them to hell! I'm done with their scheming shit! Fuck them hard in the asses!

I'm not letting them get away with this. Fuck. I'll have to be a bitch to this nice old man, just to keep them from getting the money. I clean everything into my bag, wipe the wetness from my cheeks, and head out the door.

I walk down the hallway and sniff. My nose has almost cleared out the snot. I pull on the other strap for my backpack, resisting a grimace and blink

back the wetness building in my eyes. Why the fuck do I want to cry? The hell? Is it some kind of hormone imbalance or some shit? I don't care about that old man. *She's* the only one who -. No, I'm not dealing with that. Stop it! You piece of shit, stop crying. I walk back into the room and close the door, not even having made it through the fifteen-foot hallway. I sit down, with my back on the door, leaning into my backpack, still half full of, now, dirty clothes. I don't even need them. At least they're protecting the box. I can't have Grandpa see this. Just calm down! *Breathe*. I suck in breath and let it out with an unsteady sob. I breathe. Sob, breathe, sob, breathe, and sob. I can't stop it. I just fall forward and let it go. Just get it done and over with. I grab one of the blankets on the floor and shove my face into it. It becomes wet with tears and mucus. I quietly scream into it, keeping as much of it hidden as I can. No. Stop this. Fuck, I can't deal with this. Pull yourself together you whiny bitch.

A knock slams into my ears, shocking me out of the emotion.

"Patricia, are you ready?"

I roll over, check my boots' lacings, wipe my face off, grab my bag, and open the door. "Yeah," I say in an even a voice as I can muster. "Let's go."

Grandpa steps backward. He's in an overcoat, probably older than I am, and oversized, probably something he got when he was way younger maybe in the army. I turn my back to him, hiding my puffy red eyes and wet cheeks.

"Is everything okay?" Grandpa asks.

"Yeah."

“Are you sure?”

“Just a sad ending to a book,” I lie.

“Oh? What was it you were reading?” He follows me toward the front door.

“*Fahrenheit 451*” I say. The truth makes the lie.

“Really? I thought it was pretty hopeful when I read it, but that was a while ago. Weren’t they rebuilding society or something? Sounds like the stuff kids your age would like.”

I scramble for something to keep him off. “It’s just that the old place had to burn down. There was something lost there.” That was actually pretty good. I should remember it for the essay. I open the front door and hop down, skipping the porch stairs. Grandpa ambles down behind me. Why the hell doesn’t he have a cane? Shouldn’t he have one, walking like that?

I open the car door for him, so we get going faster.

“Why, thank you,” he says and looks down at my face.

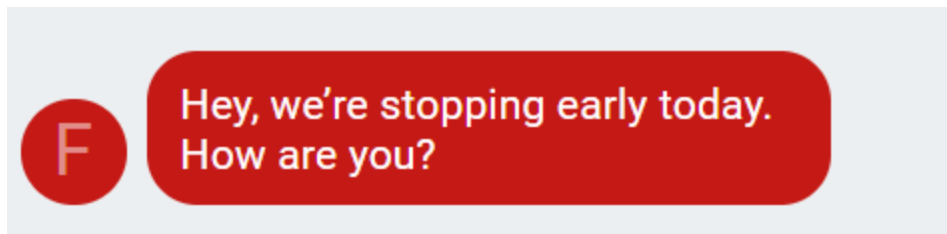
“Welcome.” I turn away and hop into the backseat instead of shotgun this time.

Chapter 3

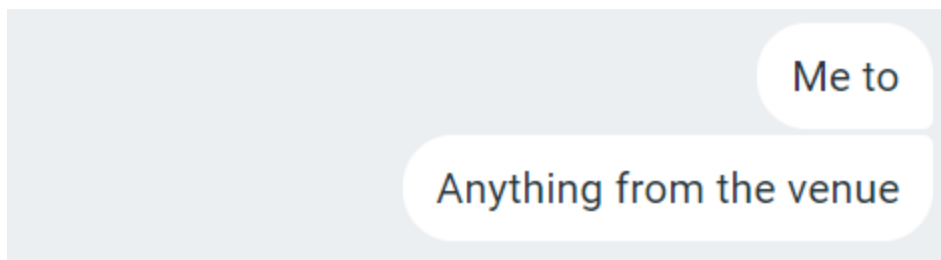
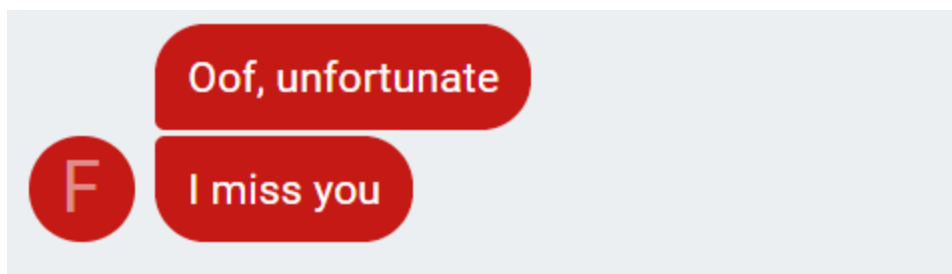
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When the car starts up, Grandpa's radio turns on, and he presses a cartridge into it. Wait, is that a tape? Like real life? Wow. That's messed up. The audio comes through on the crappy speakers. Coming through, it sounds like the whole thing has gone through a heavy high-pass filter and distortion and not in the good way. Still, the song has a pretty fun rhythm. I think it's Frank Sinatra. His smooth voice comes over "I said I love you, and that's forever." He has a great intonation, but still. It doesn't grab much of my attention. It's not powerful enough to hit me like metal does. I half-listen to Frank croon into my ear about loving somebody, as if that hasn't been done before, while waiting for us to get to "Greg and Judy's." Each hill feels like the end of the ride, but it isn't. Eventually, we turn off to a flat gravel one lane road, further into the forest. Each little stone vibrates the entire car, like it didn't have any suspension at all. It probably doesn't anymore. The trees get thicker and more cramped. The road

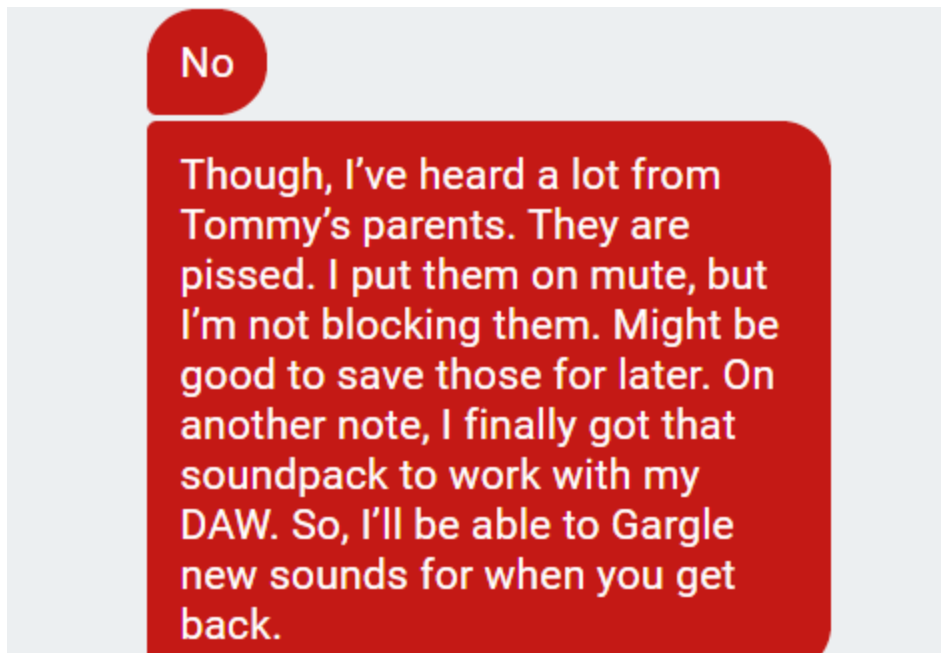
narrows becoming claustrophobic. There aren't any turnoffs or forks. My phone dings.



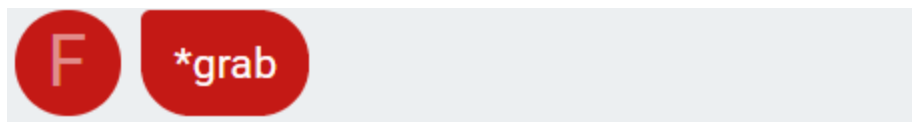
I smile. Always full sentences and perfect grammar. Fucking Firio.



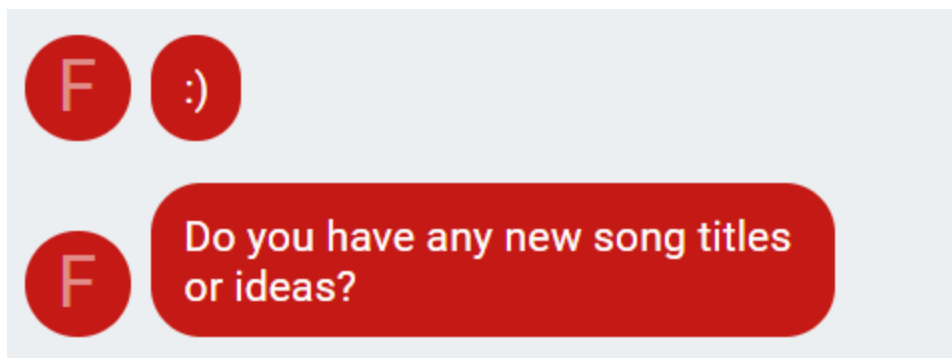
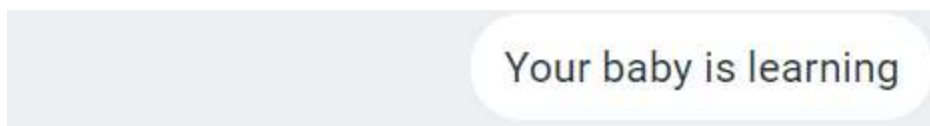
"Firio is typing" shows up for a while. Oh boy, a long message. "

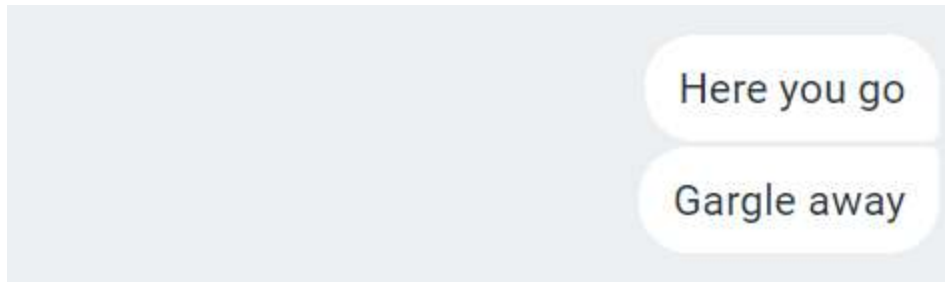


Shortly after reading I get another text.

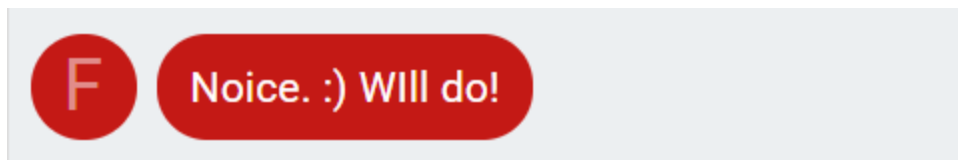


I exhale. LOL.





I copy-paste my notes into another text and send it over.



I feel the car slow down, I look up from my phone, and Grandpa turns off the road onto a gravel patch. Just inside, the forest opens into a clearing with a small white house, with a real ass picket white fence. Like these people actually took a fucking time machine to get their house to survive any sort of sensical renovations. Tree stumps litter the yard. There's a small cream-colored VW bug parked in a large round gravel patch.

I put my phone away as Grandpa pulls the car up the gravel path stopping by the house. A weeping willow's viny branches brush me as I hop out of the car. I leave the bag stuffed under the passenger seat. Fuck if I'm leaving the one source of entertainment back there.

Then I hear it.

Heavy notes reach out to my ears, a sad drone underscoring the melody in the wrong key to be mournful. I feel the rhythm, slow but content, I feel an open cathedral. It's empty as the only person there plays this song. It rebounds

through the gothic arches as a red gateway opens, revealing hordes of monstrous beings. A slight buzzing reaches my ears, underscoring the downbeats of the song, imitating their insectoid wings. Oh, this is the good shit. Never heard it before, but damn, I need to know whatever that is. I start tapping the side of my baggy cargo shorts, imagining the heavy drums and organ synth complementing its melodies. This is what I needed.

A car door slams behind me, breaking me out of the rhythm. Grandpa shuffles up next to me.

“Oh, Greg’s playing today!” he grins, “he’s a wonderful musician.”

“What instrument is that?” I ask

“You’ll find out! Grandpa’s eyes sparkle., I shouldn’t get attached or let him like me. Fuck.

“Ok,” I say and walk up to the door, looking for a doorbell.

Grandpa shuffles up to me and puts his hand on a weird bronze thing in the middle of the door. He takes the little swinging handle and knocks it on the door. Why not just knock on the actual door? Or just text “here”? Old people are weird.

The playing stops, and a pair of footsteps come to the door. It opens, revealing a pair of people, definitely older than sixty. The lady has an apron covered in sawdust, while the guy is in suspenders with business pants and a plaid shirt.

“George!” the man exclaims, “How are you doing?”

“Great, my granddaughter’s here.”

“Oh, you told me about her,” he turns to me, only acknowledging my presence after talking to Grandpa, “Hello little lady,” I taste the disgust on my tongue my spine at those words, “My name’s Mr. Fletcher, and this is my wonderful wife Mrs. Fletcher.”

Mrs. Fletcher nods. “Howdy do! Do either of you want drinks?”

Grandpa pipes up, “I’d love a lemonade if you have it. My doctor said no more beers for me. Thank you, Judy.”

“Coming right up,” Judy scurries back inside, to serve the very whim of Grandpa before I can even reply.

“Well come on in,” Greg says, throwing open the door.

The house smells like sawdust and burning wood. Greg guides Grandpa and me down the hall, into an open room filled with antiques and a boxy tv. There’s a guy with an afro painting something on there. It’s so blotchy. How old can that tv be? Ugh. Why do old people always need everything to be old around them? Wow, I just sounded like a teenage stereotype there. “*Grain of truth in a mountain of lies.*” I pull my phone out to type that in the song title note.

“Who’re you textin?” Asks Judy, trying to look at my screen. “Is it your BoyFriend?” she uses that overly interested, making fun of you, delivery.

“You know, it’s really rude to text when at a guest’s house,” Greg stares down at me with that kind of frown only achievable when your skin looks like its melting off of your skull.

I hold his gaze and don’t move my phone, tapping out the note. “I know. I wasn’t texting anybody. I was writing a note to myself for later.”

“Oh, really,” he says, “What was it about then.”

Okay, now you’re just an ass. I guess I’ll have to diffuse this situation anyway. “It actually was a song title. I give that fake gleaming smile that adults love, pretending not to be irritated.

“Oh really?” Greg breaks into his own smile. Wow, that was a quick turnaround “What do you play?” he asks.

I reply, “Mostly percussion, though, I’ve touched on piano and guitar as well.”

Greg heads to the corner of the room, where there’s this rectangular contraption.

“Oh no, he’s getting the hurdy-gurdy out,” Judy winks to me, “Now you’ve done it.”

“Darn tootin’ I’m getting it out! Too few know about this wonderful instrument!”

He picks up the wooden contraption, pulling a strap over his shoulder. “Sweetie,” I cringe at the word “*This* is a hurdy gurdy! A wonderful instrument that’s bowed through the crank and played sort of like a piano.”

He spins the crank at the side of the box and presses in the tabs sticking out the front, restarting that earlier song. The music fills the room.

Good music, but I keep getting the creeps from this guy. The song continues for a few minutes, filling me with the longing for any decent percussion.

“Is that hers?” Grandpa asks, breaking the spell. He stares at a tall wooden sculpture next to the couch, surrounded by wood shavings and sawdust.

Judy sits down on the couch and pulls the wooden piece around. Not sure what it looks like. Though, it rests on a tray, with wheels on the bottom, along with metal tools, saws chisels and hammers.

Judy nods. And the room’s attention settles on her. “Yes. This is going to be her. It’s nowhere near done yet, but I wanted to see what you thought of it before I got too far.”

Grandpa smiles. “I think she would have loved it,” he sniffs. His voice sounds on the edge of breaking.

I look at the shapeless mass of wood. “A statue of Grandma?”

I feel Greg’s hand grab my shoulder. It has that uncomfortable heat, and my muscles tense around the area. “Yeah,” he says quietly, “Judy started it when we heard about the downturn, but things advanced too quick for much to be finished.”

I slip out of his grasp, still not comfortable with that. I feel my spine tingling. Ugh. Creepy old man.

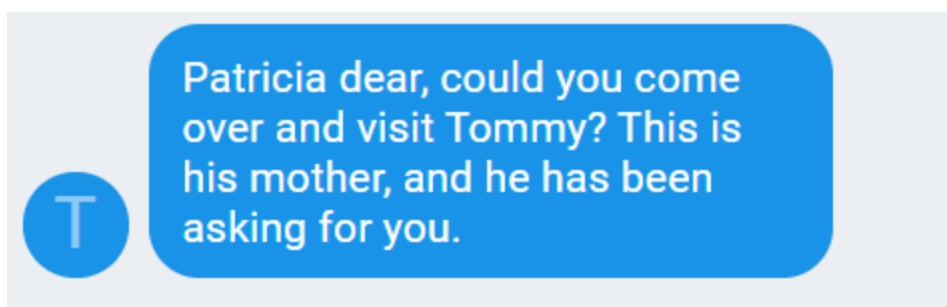
Grandpa looks into my eyes. It breaks me. I feel my mind tugging into *that* direction again. No. No no No NO. Not dealing with that shit at all. Just stay polite and get out of here. “I need some fresh air,” I say. My throat tightens and that stomach pit returns. No. Can’t deal with this now. NOT dealing with this now!

I shift my bag on my shoulder and rush through the kitchen to a glass back door.

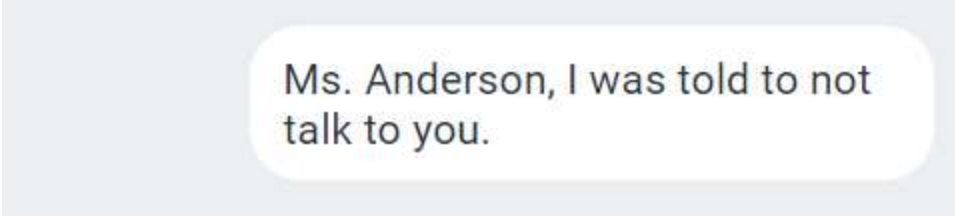
Chapter 4

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 - .- .- / .-.. .-- .-.. .. -- .- .- ...

The summer heat hits my face as I close the door behind me. I take a deep breath, hold it, and let go. I ignore the nagging emotions exploding inside that room. I head into the grand, open backyard with so much green, green grass, almost like the color was spray-painted on the ground. “Spray-Painted Grass.” I pull out my phone and type the phrase into the notes right below “Grain of Truth in a Mountain of Lies”. My phone vibrates in my hand. Tommy? There’s a text from him. I open it up. I didn’t think he could text. I read it.

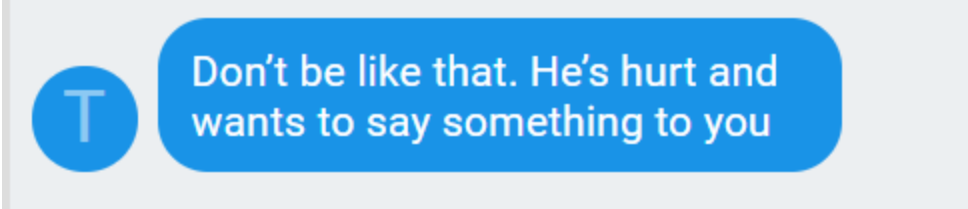


Oh fuck. Okay, just be professional. I remember the lawyer saying something about texts as evidence.



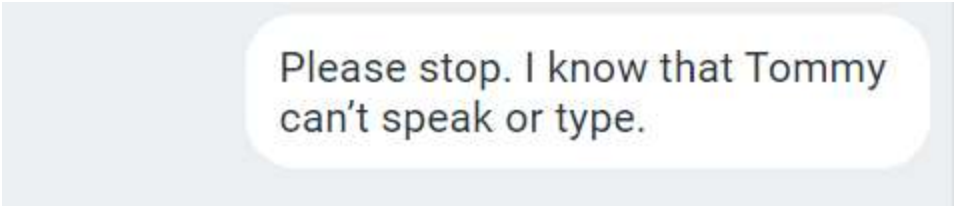
Ms. Anderson, I was told to not talk to you.

I use the same grammar as essays. Keep it clean and distant.

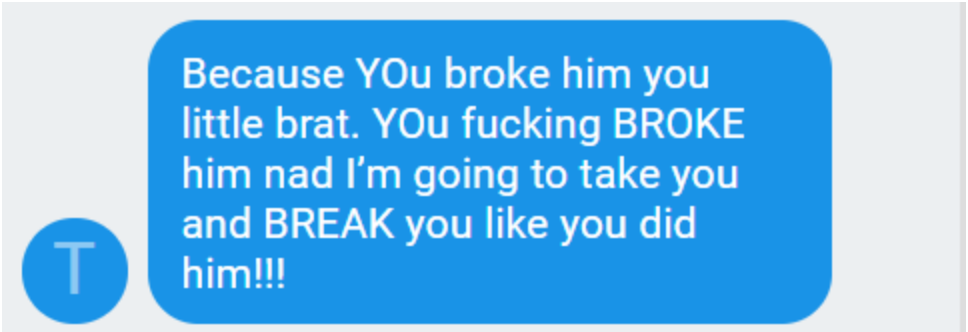


T Don't be like that. He's hurt and wants to say something to you

Okaay, creepy.



Please stop. I know that Tommy can't speak or type.



T Because YOU broke him you little brat. YOU fucking BROKE him nad I'm going to take you and BREAK you like you did him!!!

Breathe! In, out. It's fine. She's a trash person who raised a trash kid. I don't have to care what she says. There's another ding as a text comes in. I take Firio's advice, ignore the text, and mute the notifications for Tommy's number. I put my phone in my pocket. Just stay away. If Tommy wants to talk, he can talk later.

I look back up and get myself back to the present. There's some kind of log bench, still with bark on it, between the garden walling the house from the spray-painted grass. I dump my bag on the bench, testing its weight. Well, the seat doesn't collapse. I slowly sit down on it. I don't die immediately, but my leg vibrates. Shaky leg syndrome strikes yet again. I sigh. Just distract yourself. I look through my bag and spot Grandma's notebook from the bag. No, let's not. Last time I looked in here I nearly bawled. I'll just tap out that pangram again. I change the rhythm of my leg bounces, playing the slight thumping like a kickdrum.

... .-. SPH-

I add in my hands, speeding up the process. Tapping out the letters faster.

.. -. -... IN-

Wait, no, that's not X. It's like B. Ugh, I pull out my phone again, ignoring the text notification number and look up "Morse code." The browser opens up the page, then, "No Connection Available." Well screw me, I guess. I check for wifi. Nope, nothing. Fine, cell connection. I'll pay the fifty cents to download a Morse pdf. Nothing, there's barely any connection out here. How did Greg even call Grandpa with so little? I glance back to the giant ass window in the kitchen and spot it. There's a corded landline mounted on the wall. Wow, I really am in the medieval era. Next, I'll be seeing that spinny dial phone and lead paint. I

glance at the walls inside. I can't tell if the paint looks new or not... Welp, I'm not licking those walls anytime soon.

I turn my thoughts back to the Morse. B, Dah, Dit, Dit, Dit. What the heck is X then? Something longer. B's used more than X. Maybe - I tap out Dah, Dit, Dit, Dah. Yeah, that sounds about right. I carefully tap out the word with my foot.

... S

.-. P

.... H

.. I

-. N

-..- X

Faster,

... -.-. -. -..- SPHINX.

There we go! Pride balloons in my chest as I tap out that last Dah. An idea hits me! Maybe I can do this in concerts. That'd be one hell of a solo. People'd be all over it. I could even make separate messages for each percussive element! The snare message could say one thing while the cymbal and hi hats say something else! Note app: *Morse drum solo*. Saved. I could also say different things every time. Or maybe repeat the chorus. That'd be pretty fucking baller.

Oh. Yeah. We might not ever go back. There was the gun, and the fight. The place probably wont ever let us back. Fuck. I look down and feel head

around my eyes. My whole world's going to shit. Fuck that asshole. He ruined fucking everything! All this bullshit is ruining my entire fucking life! I can't believe this shit. One fucking month ago everything was fine! And on top of all this, *She* went and fucking died! I almost scream.

Stop!

I need to calm down. If Grandpa or Greg and Judy see me like this, they'll freak out. Maybe they should. No. They'd just call Mom and Dad. I wish I could just turn eighteen and leave already. If only Grandma hadn't died. If only she hung on for two more years. I could deal with her shit after their shit. Fuck her too. I'm done with this world. Tears well up in my eyes. I'm done with everything just deciding to ruin my life. But of course, what else would happen! I already got shit parents. Of course, shitty parents are going to do shitty things to their kid. Maybe I should just kill-

I stop.

Breathe in. Breathe out. Let the muscles relax. Stillness. Remember, Brent said it's not worth it. This feeling is temporary, and that choice is permanent. I wouldn't get anything out of it, and everyone else would have to deal with the fallout. Thank fuck for Brent. Best teacher in the world.

All right.

Reset.

Two more years, I whisper to myself.

I take a shuddering breath and glance at my bag. The telegraph key sits on top of my stuff inside. I pull it out and set it on the bench. I grasp the black wooden knob. I feel a raw wood grain under my hand, muted only by an old coat of black paint.

“I vow to escape as soon as I can.” My hand begins to tap with the telegraph as the words leave my lips. Under my breath, I say “I wish I had a way to escape now.”

... .-. .-. .-. .-. / --- ..- / -... .-. .- .-. .-. / --- ..- .- .- .- / .- .- .- .- .- / --- ..- .- .- .- / --- ..- .- .- .-
/ ...- --- .- SPHINX OF BLACK QUARTZ JUDGE MY VOW

“Well, Sphinx, what do you think?”

A gust of wind blows through the grass, shaking the trees at the edge of the forest in an odd rhythm.

.... . .-. .-. -- . HELP ME

That’s... one hell of a coincidence. Wish I could have recorded it. Creepy, though.

I turn my attention back to the telegraph. What do I say next?

Wait. I pull out my phone and open notes again. “Sphinx’s Judgment of a Vow.” Hell yeah, coolest one yet. That’s definitely going to have the Morse drum solo. I start tapping out another phrase into the telegraph.

-... .-. .-. -- / ... --- .-. --- DRUM SOLO

The wind rises again, throwing some gravel from the roof. The stones tap out the rhythms of Morse.

.... .-. .-. --- HELLO

Okay, that's not right. My face feels cold. How the hell would the wind respond so perfectly. I tap out a response.

.... .. HI

The wind continues, rustling the branches, swaying in the wind, and throwing more rocks and debris on the ground in a perfect, even rhythm.

.-. --- / / --. . WHO IS THERE

Well shit. That's way too freaky for me. I grab the telegraph, put it in the box and shove it all down onto my bag. More swishing happens. I don't listen. Instead I walk back over to the house. The rhythm of my footsteps line up with everything else. Nope. Not happening. I open up the French door and shove it closed.

"Oh, we were about to come and get you!" Judy says in that all-too-happy tone of voice. I pretend that everything's fine.

"Why?" Relatively fine.

Greg tenses up from his chair and opens his mouth as if to admonish me before he's interrupted by Grandpa.

"Well, dinner's cooking and we were invited to stay for it, since it's almost done."

"Okay," I mutter.

"Young lady, I don't like your tone," Greg snaps.

"Greg," Judy puts a hand on her husband.

Of course, he's that type. I groan internally. Whatever, I'll deal with it. "Sorry," I say. "Just dealing with stuff." I pointedly look at the misshapen block of wood.

Greg and Judy blanch. Grandpa looks at me with a sympathetic but questioning expression.

That should shut them up. Let's just get through dinner.

"I'm so sorry," Judy says.

"It's fine. What's for dinner?" I say halfheartedly, changing the subject.

"Oh, it's my world-famous ravioli!" Judy beams, the embarrassment completely gone from her face.

"Oh no, you got her started on it again," Greg says. "Once you get her talking about her ravioli, she never stops."

"Well I -" Judy begins to say before the oven chimes. "Oh, you'll have to find out yourself!"

Chapter 5

- / / - - - - / / .. / - / - / ... - - / ..
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 - . . . / .. / / - - - - - - / - / .. / / / - /

We're sitting at a rectangle wooden table. Everyone is staring down at their napkins, muttering empty words as the food gets cold. I'm bowing my head, eyes open, as much rebellion as I can get under Greg's closed, reverent, eyes. Ugh. Praying before a meal sucks so much ass. Why the hell did this ever become a thing? I bet everybody throughout time thought this sucked, but apparently some stupid book made by a dead, maybe real, person wrote. The logical side of my brain responds. They do it to bless the food. It'll be fine. Yeah, but It's still dumb and religion is dying already. So, just kill it all.

My foot becomes restless and starts bouncing, making the minimal amount of noise necessary.

Amen.

Thank fuck! Not thanking God. That guy sucks for having this in the first place. No way I'll be thanking him for making a stupid practice short, even if he exists. There was so damn much of that during Grandma's- No. I'm not thinking of that now. Later. I pick up my plate and look for the serving spoon and ravioli

bowl. They're with Judy, on the opposite side of the table to me. The "Men" are sitting at the heads of the table. Judy stands up, picking up the ravioli bowl and starts serving her husband first. Fucking traditional sexism, making the woman serve everybody. She's not a waitress, you're not paying her, you pig. Now I'm actually pissed. The muscles in the back of my neck start twitching, combining with the restless foot, sending angry pulses through my body. Judy gets around to me, giving me four raviolis and some white sauce. I want to say something so fucking bad, but I fucking can't. They'd get pissed at me more than Greg is already. Then, it hits me. The smell is divine, way more holy than any stupid prayer. I'll even deal with the couple of mushrooms in it. I take my fork, only to have Grandpa touch my hand. I look around. Greg is sitting there glaring at me. Grandpa hasn't touched his food either. The only movement is my leg under the table, and Judy's footsteps on the floor. The tensing in my neck lines up with them all and create a very particular rhythm.

.-. .-. .-. .-. /-. .-. .-. / -- . PLEASE HELP ME

I drop my fork and tense still, willing my entire body to stop. I grimace. The message continues, only slower. I can't stop my body. My leg still bounces.

.... .-. .-. .-. HELP

My neck still twitches. And it repeats

.... .-. .-. .-. /-. .-. .-. /-. .-. .-. HELP HELP HELP

Judy finishes serving the sexist pigs and herself. She walks around the table to the opposite side of me and sits down, taking her sweet time to take

her napkin and lay it on her lap. Fuck! I'm so hungry, just eat and get out of there. The rhythms continue, and I try to ignore them. I need to just get away from this situation.

.-- .-.. .- .- PLEASE

Judy clinks her fork against the side of her bowl. Adding to the rhythm.

.... .-.. .-.. / -- . HELP ME

And brings half a ravioli to her mouth, leaving a small drip of white sauce on the side of her lips. The wind outside picks up, rattling a wind chime and making the house creak.

Grandpa takes his hand off of mine and my fork and starts eating, along with Greg. The clinks of forks against the pasta plates line up. I try to block out the Morse, instead using my fork to scoop up the biggest ravioli I can eat, filling my mouth, into my cheeks. Screw manners. I want food. Actually, screw manners specifically to annoy Greg. Then, my teeth crunch on something.

Walnuts! What the fuck?

.... .-.. .-.. HELP

I almost spit take but keep the food in my mouth. Instead I chew faster, each chomp adding to the beat. I swallow, ignoring the walnuts. The taps, clinks and creaks keep lining up into those few pleading words

.-- .-.. .- .- /-.. .-.. / -- . PLEASE HELP ME

“Oh, honey, was it all right?” Judy looks across the table at me.

I ignore Greg's accompanying glare and lie. "Yeah, I'm fine." Then truth "I was surprised by the walnuts!" I say, trying to smile, but my voice cracks. My face feels empty. I can't fake it. "Sorry, I need to go to the bathroom."

"Are you okay, Patricia?" Grandpa asks next to me.

"I said I'm fine." I say too quick "I just need to take care of something." I stand up and ask "Bathroom?"

"It's down the hall to the left," Greg grumbles.

I don't thank him as my boots add to the growing rhythm.

I rush into the bathroom. Pink assaults my eyes as the I turn on the rusty sink. Water dribbles out.

.... .-.. HEL

No! I turn it off. I sit on the toilet. fuck, Fuck, Fuck! Of all the times to be haunted! Screw all of this. I'm done.

Breathe, in. I remember what to do in these situations. Just breathe.

Brent and I sat in the empty classroom, with the door open. I'm supposed to call him Mr. Clifford, but we had bigger issues to deal with than overfamiliarity.

Brent looks like he's in his fifties, but is actually much younger. He's dressed the same way as always, blue sweater, over a red collared shirt and black suit pants with running shoes to top it all off002E

Brent looked me in the eyes, "Hey, you did better today. Running's progress."

“Glad you think so,” I glared at the wall behind him, “I’m still here, and teacher still ran after me. Why do they always keep pursuing? Everyone still keeps chasing me, grabbing me.”

“They don’t know better, almost nothing about how to deal with these situations.”

I met his eyes “I tell them, you tell them, the fucking psych tells them. Who else will have to tell them before I fucking get to hit back? If I were an adult, this would be harassment, assault, and battery! I could act in self-defense and get restraining orders!” Brent held my gaze, brown rings around her pupils stared me down, and heavy bags hung under his eyelids.

“You know that’s not the answer.”

I looked down. *That* memory replayed in my head again. I didn’t really see the desk or feel its uncomfortable cold metal bars that never seemed to warm up.

“Everyone who actually talks to me says I’m doing right thing, and they’re wrong.” I said, starting *That* conversation again, “Why am I always in so much fucking trouble? Why can’t people just leave me alone?”

“That’s nothing you can control. The people in control don’t know what was actually there, and you have to adapt to what they think happened and how things work.”

I slumped down, done with this. Brent didn't put his hand on my back. He didn't give me a hug. He wasn't allowed. All he said was "Just breathe, in and out. Breathe through this. Find your rhythm."

In. Out. In. Let your brain catch up. Out. Just pay attention to the breaths. In. Come back. Out.

I'm here, in the bathroom. Figure out what's the problem. There's Morse saying, "help me." In. I ignore the Morse screaming at me from every little possible rhythm. I separate the rhythm of my breaths from the message. What can I do, moving forward? I could ignore it. Not likely. I could run away. It seems that it follows you. I could respond. That could work.

I breathe, In, out. I open my eyes and take the telegraph out of my bag.

.-- --- / / - WHO IS THIS

Taps return, the faucet drips, the house creaks, and pipes rattle.

... --- .- .. / -. ... -..- .. -. --- .- / --- ..- / - / --- ..- / --- ..-

LORD NUXINOR OF THE HOUSE OF -

Breathe. In, out. Ignore all the other tapping. What's next? How is this happening?

I tap out.

.... --- .- / .- .- . / -..- --- ..- / - .- -..- .- ..- .- HOW ARE YOU TALKING

.- ..- / -- -..- / -- --- ..- - / .- -. -.. / .- WITH MY MOUTH AND A -

I take another breath. They're just talking. Why is it tapping? Breathe. In, out. Just keep calm. In... Out... In... Out.

A knock tears apart my concentration.

"Patricia! Are you okay in there?" Grandpa's voice asks outside the bathroom.

What wonderful timing. I think to myself, sarcastically. Just say something. Ignore the tapping. "Kinda, I'm feeling a little sick," I yell.

"Oh, was it the food. Sometimes it gets a bit rich for me too," he guffaws.

No, just keep vague. "No, it's something else," I say.

"Oh," Grandpa says, "I'll leave you too it, then."

I keep silent, listening to the tapping.

.-.. .-.. / -- . / .. -- / - .-. .- .-.. .-.. . -.. -LP ME I'M TRAPPED

I tap back to him.

--- -.- / .-.. .- - .-. OK LATER

I stand up, put the telegraph back into the bag, and ignore the creaks and clanging going on. I wash my hands out of habit and head back out.

I finish the meal and head home.

Chapter 6

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I start to head to the kitchen. I woke up in the middle of the night, of course. The memories of the previous day slide into my brain, leaving Greg and Judy's in a hurry, keeping a straight face as I could as the Morse rings in my ears, the entire car ride each jolt making an unignorable dit or dah. I went immediately to bed.

Well shit. My limbs feel that kind of wiggly weakness that comes with hunger. So, I continue to the dark kitchen and open the fridge. This one doesn't fit with the rest of the kitchen décor. Actually, no, just oldness. It's the white plasticky refrigerator my parents convinced Grandma and Grandpa to get right before I was born. It has separate water and ice dispensers that Grandpa never uses. I open it up and there's the pitcher of tap water that tastes like dirt. I also notice a new couple pieces of glass Tupperware. I grab one and open it up ravioli. Fuck.

I close my eye again and flip on the lights as the wet and pasted toothbrush enters my mouth. I open my closed eye and look around. Half the world looks too bright, but even with that brightness, I see a plain bathroom with a blue shower curtain and old finger-painting framed above the toilet.

One of mine of course. One of those hand-turkeys I did in elementary school. Long flowy lines awkwardly crunch and curl around the page, stemming from my artsy phase. Disgusting. I want to tear this thing apart. Grandpa would notice, though. I feel the bristles of my brush on my gums, scraping the beginnings of late-blooming wisdom teeth. I lean over, spit the excess, and move to my tongue. I turn on the faucet, pushing the bristles to the back of my tongue. I spit the rest of the suds out, lick my lips, spit again, cup my hands, and slurp up the water. Swish, swish, Spit.

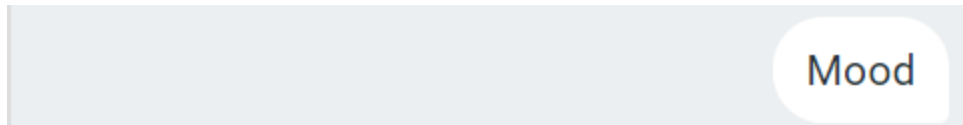
I look up to the mirror. My eyes stare back, the green irises a little too bright to be pretty. The rest of me is just there. Nothing special, skinny, still wearing my leather jacket, a girl whose muscles are a little too big to be attractive topped off with short, thin, straight, brown blah hair, and steel-toed combat boots she never takes off when anyone is around. I usually put some kind of effort into looking nice at school. Though never much, so the boys don't try anything. Not that they'll do that anymore with what happened with the trial. Fuck, the whole school knows that shit. I remember the looks I got in the halls. I stand and stare at what they looked at. What they were so afraid of, what horrified them. Me.

Welp, I don't need to care about that shit now. I close down the thought and let the shrinking bags under my eyes and small blackheads show. The stress from these past two months shows. The stress from before then shows. God damn. How long have I been on the end of my rope, ready to snap at whatever? Fuck me.

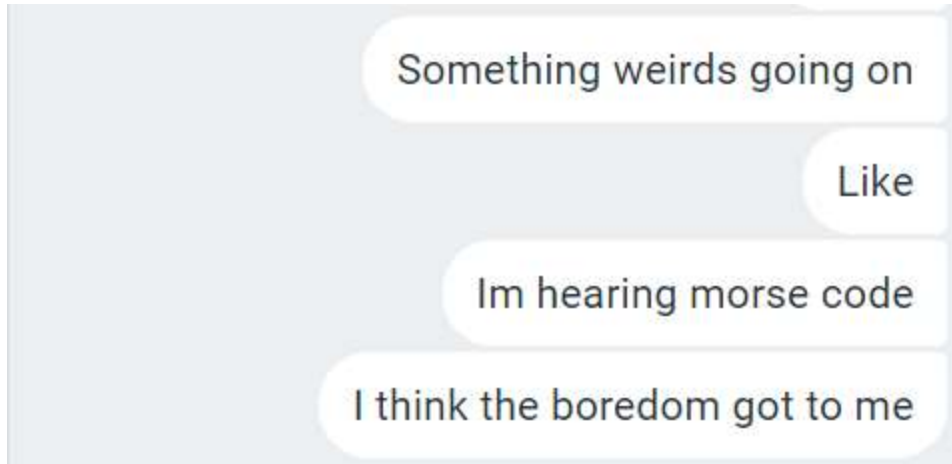
There's a vibration behind me, and I feel coolness descend onto my neck. I listen for a second at the AC. No Morse. I turn off the lights, open the door, and head back around the corner into my room.

I close the door and step over the scattered clothes on the floor to stare down at the bed from the side. It's an absolute mess, the blankets are barely on anymore. I don't feel that tired right now, figures. Whatever. I feel the temptation to walk over and grab my phone. Instead, I flump down, the entire mattress catches me, pulling my boots off the ground. A wooden clack resounds against metal and carpet. Nah. Not now. Not dealing with that weird ass voice. I scooch forward and reach out to where I remember plugging my phone in before knocking unconscious. I find the cord and wrap my index and middle fingers around it, pulling the phone up toward me. My fingers meet the charging port. I rotate the thing in my dominant left hand and wake it up with the touch of my thumbprint.

There are a couple texts from Firio. His summer camp classes are giving him shit.



But I also text.



Well shit. The whole world goes on around me, while I'm not there. Who the hell would want to live like this? Old people who didn't grow up in the modern world. I'm done with my life. I feel the anger just building in me. I punch the bed. A clack comes again as something falls over. No. I'm not getting it. Dealing with that shit during the day sucks. At night it'll be even worse. But it's better than dealing with those thoughts.

"Fine I'll go pick you up."

I reach over to the telegraph key and grab it by the knob, looking down from the pillowcase to guide me to the thing with now adjusted eyes.

I roll off the bed the same way I came, away from the phone, and set up the telegraph key on the carpeted ground.

.... .-.. .-. --- HELLO

The room is silent, for a second. No response I add more.

.---. . / -.- - - - ..- / .- - WHERE YOU AT

The wind picks up again.

--- / -.- .- -.- / .- .-. . / -.- - - - ..- / -. .- - - - .. -. -. / .. / -... -.. / - - - - / -
 / - - - ..- - / ... - - - . / ... -. .- -. -. -. ... / .. - .- .. -.. / -... . / ... - - - / .- - - - -. -. .-. .-. -. -. /
 - - - - /- / .- / -. .- - / - - - ...- .-. . / .- ..- .- .-. /- -. -. / .- / .-.. - - - -. -. /
 - .. -- . OH YAY ARE YOU COMING I NEED TO SET OUT SOME SNACKS IT'LL BE
 SO WONDERFUL TO HAVE A GUEST OVER AFTER SUCH A LONG TIME

Like halfway through Nuxinor's sarcastic message, I start changing my clothes, getting some cargo pants, and sliding them over my boots. Yeah, this'll be a trek. I exhale LOL.

Chapter 7

.. / -. .-. .-. / .- / -. .-. .-. .-. .-. / -. .-. .-. .-. .-. / .-. .-. .-. / .. /- ..
 / -. .-. .-. / .- ... / .- / -. .-. .-. .-. .-. / .-. .-. .-. / -. .-. .-. / -- / .. /- .-. /
 -- .-. .-. .-. .-. / -- / -. .-. .-. .-. .-. .-

I step through the treeline into the forest. Leaves crunch under my feet, each step making another tap in the Morse that called for help.

-. .-. .-. / -. .-. .-. / - .-. / -- / .-. .-. .-. .-. / .-. .-. .-. .-. NOW GO TO THE ROCK WALL it says.

I pause and look around, searching for anything but trees. I glare at the telegraph after finding nothing. I parse the letters for a second and tap out: -. -
 -- / .-. .-. .-. .-. NO ROCK

Now the night sounds of beetles and cicadas buzz in rhythm to say --
 -. .-. / -. .-. .-. / -. .-. .-. .-. / -. .-. .-. .-. / -. .-. .-. .-. / .- - / .-. .-. .-. .-. /-. /
 -- / -. .-. .-. .-. .-. .-. .-. HOW CAN YOU NOT, CAN YOU AT LEAST SEE THE CLEARING

I look, running deeper into the forest. There's a small grotto created by a number of dead trees blocking the growth of new ones. I reply -. .-. .-. YES

A chorus of insect mating calls and hoots form, ..-. .. -. .-. .-. .-. .-. /
 --. .-. .-. .-. / .- / ... - .-. .-. - FINALLY, THERE'S A START

The forest peters out, like it has to take a breath. Then starts a new message
 -. --- .- / .-.. --- --- - / ..- --- .- / - / -- .-.. --- .- NOW LOOK FOR
 THE GLOW

I whip my head around, flashlight scanning the treeline around me. There's nothing glowing. Flashlight must be too bright to see it. I briefly consider the possibility that this is some kind of serial killer out to kill me. I discard it in favor of the horror movie idea: Either I follow its instructions to die and release some kind of ghost's soul, or I don't and die anyway. I close my eyes, turn off the flashlight and just wait for a second. Nothing other than the bugs and owls. I reopen my half-adjusted eyes, letting them get used to the dark. There's a small glow to my right, looks reddish green, some kind of glow beyond the treeline. I walk toward it, each footstep crunching at a regular rhythm. No Morse, just a tempo. I keep to a Common Time rhythm with my footsteps as the glow gets slightly brighter and brighter. It's a ring. A small glow pokes through, tinted green by some kind of roiling film.

"Horror movie it is, then." I mutter to myself. "Maybe a dream?"

I look around, there's no movement, just me and the - portal? I glance through. Nothing discernable. Looks like some kind of grey floor surrounded by green and brown. I take a deep breath. That person, Lord Nuxinor I think he said, might be trapped on the other side. My stomach tightens and I reach out my hand to touch the inside of the ring. It feels like slime, but not sticky slime, like the surface of a water balloon but more liquid. I press my hand in more. The

film surrounds my hand, like a water balloon, then pops on the other side, coming up my arm like a sleeve. My hand feels warm, like sun beaming down on my arm. I pull it back with a weird shlorping sound. I look down at my hand, then back to the house. Screw it, better than flipping between sad, bored, and angry in that museum exhibit. I press both my arms through, then my left leg. It lands on a hard surface, a small sidewalk-like crack under the ball of my foot. Then I close my eyes and push my head into the roiling skin of the portal.

Coming though I'm blinded. My eyes wrench shut against the light. I pull through, the balloon-esque portal pushing me the rest of the way into this bright space. My eyes adjust, and I see a light beaming down from the top of a flight of stairs that looked like they were made out of stone noodles. There aren't any handrails. Around the stairs, there are uneven concrete-like walls that have little lines and pieces of something embedded in them. I step forward to the stairs, testing them before I rush up. I emerge from the basement-like room, and there are ruins of something all around me. Gray stone shapes stack on top of each other. No brick, just noodles, balls of stone and a few uneven rounded planes stacked haphazardly together. I feel like I'm in a half-destroyed art installation. A lot of walls and some structures covered with moss and vines still stand. I hear a small, high pitched voice yelling to my right, behind a wall made of columns of noodles. Then, I feel something hit me in the side, into the wall. I fall against it. The force isn't much, but it shoves me. Bewildered, I glance around, searching for the source of the strike. Nothing around but stones. I feel it hit

again, this time, on my stomach. Like a pillow whipped at me. It hits, not hard, but nothing's there. I stand up, leaning against the wall, holding up the Morse key and tapping.

.--- - "WHAT"

The invisible force hits again, making the first dah of the message. I hear the small voice again. I can't make it out, but I hear the Morse. --. . "GE--"

The letters feel so slow. I can't pay attention with this thing whapping me. Maybe I'm close enough. I run around the wall, yelling, "Hey, can you hear me!"

There's a collapsed plane, broken into a pile of haphazard shapes.

"Finally! There's an orb with a Talent that's doing all of this. Grab it! I'm trapped until it's destroyed."

The voice comes from the pile, but I don't see anyone under it. I whip my head around. There's a tall pedestal made on top of one of the intact structures. The structure's made of those uneven panes, with a bunch of spikes at the top, like pinched clay pressed onto a flat surface. I'm surprised that it's still holding up the stone and glowing orb. The sphere's big, probably the size of a beach ball. It glows green and brown, the colors like swirling clouds inside a plastic kid's toy.

"Above!" the voice calls.

I look up to see a broken noodle falling on top of me. I lunge forward, and the rubble lands where I had just been standing. Another loose piece of stone shifts from the top of the wall towards my direction. It settles, then moves

again, falling straight at me. I book it, running to the structure with the glowing orb.

More rubble flies, small pebbles bean my arms and back. Thumping pain hits me in time with my heartbeat. I drop the telegraph into my pocket and bolt. My heart drums in my chest, screaming that I should have exercised sometime in the past month. I ignore it, running as fast as I can to the shelter of the wooden overhang. The force slams my leg, and I fall, my foot shoved out from under me. I tumble forward hands shooting toward the ground, protecting my face. I roll the last little bit underneath the structure. “Great,” I say panting. I take stock of the situation, pulling myself up with a noodle sticking out of the wall and catching my breath. My mouth tastes like dirt and chalk. Scrapes on my hands bleed from the fall. I wipe them on my pants, now torn at the knees. “Hey, what the hell was that!” I yell.

“What do you mean what was that?” the voice replies.

I glance over the outside. It doesn’t seem like anything’s moving around the loose rubble. “I can’t see anything that’s throwing this shit! It’s like a ghost is trying to kill me!”

“Oh, I’m not sure, maybe it has something to do with that orb you still haven’t broken!” the high-pitched voice screams.

Ugh, I hear the sarcasm dripping from his tone. I glance up. I can see holes, pouring light through the balls that make up the roof, but there’s no way for me to reach it or the pedestal that I assume is still on top of it. I look to the

walls of the overhang. Same loose stones, with a stone grate made of those same stone noodles on the back, looking out to the forest. I see a bunch of rubble and wall-ruins, out the opening. Maybe I can climb one of them to get up to the pedestal.

“Hey hurry up! It’s coming back at me, and I don’t appreciate being thrown around like this!” The voice echoes from across the ruins. I glance in its direction and see nothing moving. Probably behind a wall or something.

Annoyance flares in my throat. “Well, screw you!” I yell, “You bugged me for half of the day with your nagging and all I’m getting out of it are scrapes and bruises.”

“Well boo hoo, you must hurt sooo baaad. Well little lady, that thing hasn’t stopped for the whole day I’ve been stuck here, and it won’t stop until you break it. So, get off your ass and break it!”

“Why don’t you break it!”

“Oh, I’d never thought of that! What a lovely idea! Let me get out of my hidey hole and get crushed by a giant-ass rock!” The voice sounds like a whiney child screaming for its mommy.

“Fuck you!”

Something rockets into my stomach. The impact knocks the wind out of me. I double over. That wasn’t a rock. I feel around my stomach, but nothing’s there. I hear a small clatter of a pebble falling to the floor. Stop getting distracted, I admonish myself. I look out to the ruins again. The walls look like

they're falling apart, whatever kept this mess together seems to be gone. Nope, not climbing that. I look around for whatever I can use to get up to the orb. Nothing, just rocks and weird shapes. Another one whizzes by me, nearly hitting my leg. Maybe I can take a page out of that thing's book. I grab a crumbling noodle from the ground and a couple round stones, dodging more that are flung at me and rush outside the shelter. I turn to face the orb on top of its pedestal and chuck a rock at it. I miss. Another. I miss again. A third. Then I hear a dink, like the sound a baseball makes when it hits an aluminum bat resounds through the air. But there's no crack. The rock hits the orb but it's too small to break the thing. I take a bigger chunk and throw it two-handed at the roof. As it leaves my hands, I hear scraping stone above me. I dive to the right as another piece of rubble breaks where my feet were. There's a clunk from the where the orb is. Shit, nothing. A second clunk. I look up to see the pedestal falling forward with the orb teetering over the edge on top of me. I throw up my hands. There's a thump as part of the pedestal lands on my leg with a crash. I feel shards of something scrape on my face and neck. Little pinpricks of heat escape from the scrapes. Then something cold and liquid seeps onto my ear. I open my eyes to see clear glass shattered next to me and a green-brown goop sloshing all over my face. I sit up and try to scrape it off, but it doesn't. It just seeps into my skin, heating up my insides, pressing into some kind of space I don't remember feeling before.

“Hey, did you break it!?” the high-pitched voice calls.

Old code

Guenther 58

I grin at the little guy, “I’m Pat, and I use she/her pronouns,” I lean back into the cold stone, trying to keep my internal screaming from becoming external. Just make sure to breathe and keep calm. I continue talking, “To answer your other question, I’m human.”

He looks up to me. His already big eyes bulge halfway out his skull. “What? Like, actually?” He almost screams the words.

“Yeah,” I say, “what about it.”

“I thought they went extinct!” Nuxinor jumps up and the wing decoration pops off and flutters. He hovers in the air in front of me with loud beetle-like clattering.

“What the fuck!” I scream. I suppose it’s my turn to lose my chill.

“What about it,” Nuxinor asks, mocking my earlier tone.

“You’re flying!” I stand up, and he flutters up higher to my face.

“Yes,” he says with a straight face, “Yes I am. What a fabulous thing for a pixie to do.” He speaks like he’s saying that grass grows.

“You’re a Pixie?” Okay, now the internal screaming is external. “What the hell!”

“Okay, something’s going on here,” Nuxinor says, “I’m going with this being a dream or the afterlife. That orb thing must have hit me harder than I thought. My real body is lying on its side, and my head either is cracked open or has a huge bump.”

I grin, “Okay, but seriously, you’re a pixie?”

“Yeah. What, have we gone extinct to you guys as well?” Nuxinor asks.

“No, you were made up!” I say, “like, pixies and goblins and fairies were never real!”

“What! That’s dumb!” Nuxinor drops to the ground with a frown.

“Yeah,” I mutter. Okay, things have just changed a lot. This is actually real! Fuck! I don’t know how long it’ll take to get used to this. Okay, so I’m talking to a pixie, Oh! “Hey, Nuxinor, what are your pronouns?”

“Pronouns?”

“Are you a he, she, they?”

“Oh, he. Also, feel free to just call me Nux,” he grins, “ I suppose you’ve already dropped the title. I’m not really a lord anyway. Just the inheritor of a small village.”

“Well why didn’t any of your villagers or anything help you out with that orb?” I ask, “Also, what was with that thing? Is it magic or something?”

“I suppose you had to ask,” Nux sighs, “First off, magic. The manuscripts in our library mentioned a connection between Talents and that word. Though, they also said that there were a few major differences.” He sits down cross-legged on a small pile of bricks, “Each species generates its own Talent and a certain amount of it a day, and we burn it to activate its effects. For example, I, as a pixie, make around two hours of weight-reduction a day, which is how I can fly.” He flutters his wings. “I’m too heavy for these wings to do anything right now, but with the Talent,” he starts lifting off the ground into a hover.

“Okay,” I say, “So, what Talent do humans generate? Like, I have no clue what that’s about.”

Nux floats back down to his sitting position and narrows his eyes, “Now that’s something interesting. I don’t have the manuscripts with me, but humans are the one species that don’t generate any. Instead, you are really good at using it. Like, you can take and give talents without exchanging blood, can use less for longer, and can use multiple talents at once!”

I look down at my hands. “Woah. So, that explains how we don’t know about them. When we fucked off, we must have forgotten about them.”

“Yeah, that makes sense,” Nux says, “but you can bring them back. Actually, that’s kind of related to your other question, about my village.” He looks down. “It’s being held by a bunch of elves that came around to find Talent Slaves, people to bleed and harvest Talents from.”

“Wait, what the fuck?” I ask, “First, what the hell are talent slaves?”

Nux is still looking down, though he looks up and when he sees me catch him looking up, he looks down again. “It’s where you take somebody for their Talent, bleeding them to get as much of it as you can.”

“Fucking hell,” I say.

“That’s one way to put it. I just need to figure a way to get them off of me,” he sighs, “There were some stories I heard about a Complex Talent or Talent Engine, object that has Talents infused in it, leftover here by the humans

a while ago. Thought that it might be something I could use,” he looks down, “But it’s not. You absorbed it anyway.”

“Wait! That’s what the slime was?” I feel that invisible organ slosh inside me, “It’s a Talent?”

Nux looks back to a small overhang with shattered crystal below it. “Yeah, the orb was a simple Talent Engine, an object that uses Talents to power it. When you shattered it, you must have absorbed the Talent inside.” He looks back to me. “There seemed to be a lot in there.”

“So, I can do that pushing thing now?” I ask.

Nux nods, “Probably. Some engines work a little different than people, though. Maybe you can try it out.”

I raise my eyebrows, “What, like now?”

“Why not?”

“Well, okay,” I say and break into a grin. “Yeah, I’ll just go for it!” I stand up and face the wall I was sitting against. I “reach into” that new, invisible organ. I feel it heat up and something leaks down my spine. I feel it flow and pool. I direct it forward, into my hands. The energy pulses through my skin and explodes out. There’s a puff of dust and some loose pebbles fly out. “Cool!” I say.

“Yeah,” Nux grins. “It doesn’t seem to be too powerful, but it can probably toss some things around pretty well. Sort of how the orb did with me.”

“So that’s why you were hiding in that corner?” I ask.

“Yeah, I couldn’t fly or even run. It would just toss me around,” he says, standing up, “By the way, I want to try something.” He stretches his arm out, “Take my hand.”

I reach down engulfing his tiny hand in mine. “Yeah?” I ask.

“Can you feel anything, like some energy?” he asks.

I close my eyes and focus on his hand. It feels small, bony, but there’s something else, like floating dust. Just under the skin. “Yeah, it’s weird.”

“Try to pull on that,” he says.

“Okay,” I say and focus on the dust. I feel the invisible organ open up and suck, breathing in the dust through my arm and up my spine. “Woah!”

“Eeaaush, ooh, that feels weird!” Nux pulls his hand out of mine, dropping some sparkles of that dust into my palm. He jumps around, wiggling his arms.

“Woah!” The dust in my palm melts through my skin and settles next to the slime in the invisible organ.

Nux settles down, massaging his hand. “Yeah, that was about an hour of weight reduction you just got. Consider it thanks for getting me out there.” He grins, “also for being the first to experience a direct Talent transfer for the first time in probably years.”

“Well, happy to do so!” I sit back down and out of habit pull out my phone. The clock reads 4:37. “Hey, I should go back. I can’t let anyone know that I’m gone.”

Nux perks up, “What’s that?” he says pointing at my phone.

I glance over to him. Well shit. Of course they don't have these. "It's kinda complex," I say. "Right now, I'm using it to see what time it is, and right now, I have to get back."

"Oh, about that," Nux says, standing up, "Is there a possibility that I can come along with? I would like to be able to talk to somebody about getting help with my village."

"Well," Nux is a pretty chill dude, maybe. Wait! The fuck, he's a pixie! Everyone'd freak! Besides, I don't really know what's with the portal. Maybe later. "Not yet. I don't think it would be a good idea. Like, people would freak out really bad."

"Ahh, makes sense," he says looking down, "Will you come back at least? I can't guarantee much in the way of wealth, but the sages have a lot of info we found from other human ruins."

"Fuck yeah!" I say, "I'll be back!" finally, a way to get away from all that shit with Grandma... Yeah. Grandma.

"Thank you," Nux replies, "Thank you so much."

"Hey, I'll see you later." I say with as bright a tone as I can muster and trudge off to the staircase with the portal. I do my best to not think as I find the hole and trudge down the steps.

Chapter 9

.. / - --- .. -.. -.. / -- .- .-.- / --- ..- / - / .-. .- - .-.- .-.. /- .-. .- - .. -
 -.. ..- .-.- / -- . / .- . / - .- .-.. -.- .-.. / .- / .-.. .. - - .-.. / .. / .-.. .-. .-.- .-.. / -- .- /
 -. .- - .-.. / -... ..- - / .- -- / .. / .-.- .- .-.. .-.. / -- -.- /- .-.. / .- .-.- .-.- / ..-
 -.- / - .. - . / --.- / .- .- .- / -... .- .-.- .- / - --- / -.- .- / --.- / .- .-.. .-

I step through that wobbly, not-wet-but-still-slimy, portal again. It heats up this time as I pass through, disgustingly warm. Ugh. And my foot lands on the rooty earth of the, well Earth. Words are weird. I get some dings from my phone. Huh, the connection probably doesn't reach into there. I look down. There are some texts from Firio. I'll look at them later.

My black steel-toed combat boots clomp the ground. It's not too difficult to retrace my steps since I just follow the path of broken sticks and trampled grass. The sun peeks out over the horizon. Fuck. No more sleep for me. Whatever, good light. I don't remember when I got up to come out here. I'll just sit in my room all day. Doesn't matter. The cicadas buzz around me, giving that familiar rhythm. Organic, untamed. I tromp along with that rhythm and yawn. I stop to look around with a little blariness in my eyes. Then, I hear a crunch behind me. I whip around, sparks shocking my entire body. Fuck no! Not dealing with this shit! Freezing, just breathing, my eyes search the suddenly too dark

forest. Dawn isn't bright enough. Anything could be in there. Nope! I'm outta here.

I book it the rest of the way to the treeline, only slowing down once I've broken through the treeline. And breathe. Okay I'm fine, no demons, ghosts, or any shit like that following me. Probably just an opossum or some other small critter. I'll just get to my room and be fine.

The sun heats up my back as I pick my way out of the woods. I grimace as the plain white house comes into view. Well shit. Now I have to deal with everything here. I feel frustration building in my chest, the new feeling of that liquid inside the invisible organ starts to boil. The trial that I apparently did nothing wrong to cause, the funeral that I can't even think about, and now this, some kind of exile from the people that make it okay. I feel the dry itchiness of my eyes. I'm too thirsty. Maybe I should actually run away. That other world doesn't seem so bad. Hopefully Grandpa is still snoring.

I trudge through the grass to the side entrance. I open the screen door and turn the knob on the plain white door. The weather stripping pulls from the wood as I open it.

I step into the much cooler house, to hear the kettle boiling. The mudroom looks much darker than the outside, as my eyes slowly adjust. I sit down next to a small bucket of muddy water, pull out an old butterknife and start cleaning off my boots, scraping the dirt and mud off into the bucket.

“Patricia, is that you?” Grandpa calls from the pantry. I look up, he turns the corner into the living room, wearing a bathrobe over his striped pajamas and slippers. “Where were you?”

Bit of truth bit of lie. “Couldn’t sleep,” I reply, “So, I took a walk.”

“Good to get some fresh air,” Grandpa says. He steps around the corner, out of the kitchen and looks me up and down, “Are you okay? What happened?”

I look down at the torn cargo pants stained white and a little red from the dust and scraped knees. All my bruises ache as well. I switch to a toothbrush to finish the details, then a cloth to wipe it all off.

“I’m fine,” I say, as I stand up, “Just fell.” Then I head toward my room.

“Oh- All right Patricia.” I feel his stare on my back, “Is this-? Are you sure you’re fine?”

I turn toward him, and he looks me in the eyes, then nods with a sad expression.

“I’m okay,” I say.

He takes a breath filled with an emotion I can’t name, but still empathize with, exhaustion, anxiety, stress being done with the entire world. “Just, take care of yourself. This is a hard time, and it looks like you want to take your life into your own direction. I understand if you want to make a change. Whatever you decide, I’ll be here. You’re more of an adult than I was when I enlisted, or your father when left the house. Just,” he takes another breath, “please think

things through before you do. I loved her too, and I don't want you to do anything life changing just because it's too much right now."

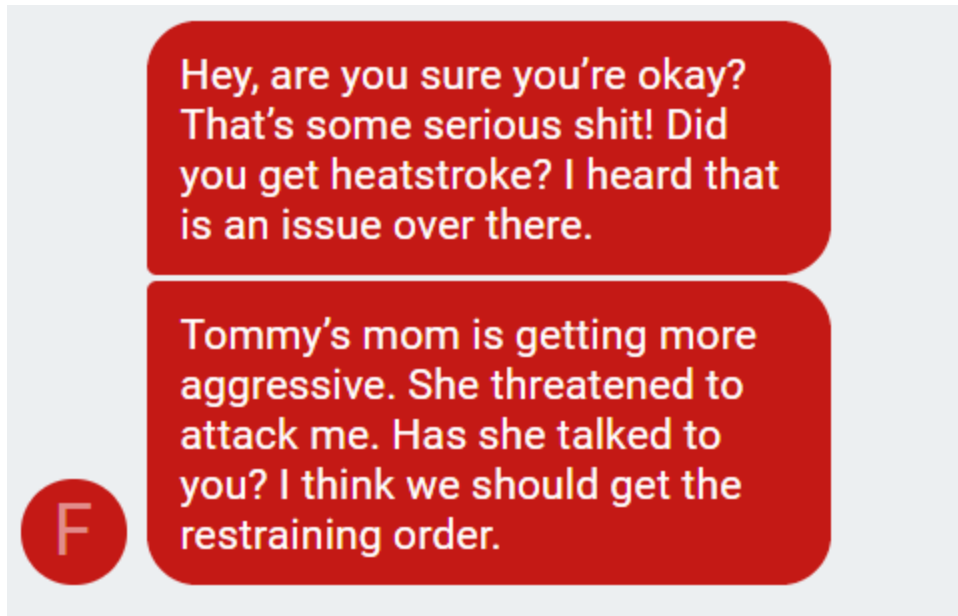
"Thank you," I reply and turn back around to my room.

"Oh, and one more thing," his voice croaks, sounding a little surprised, "If there's anything strange, just talk to me. We can figure this out together. I'll do my best to help."

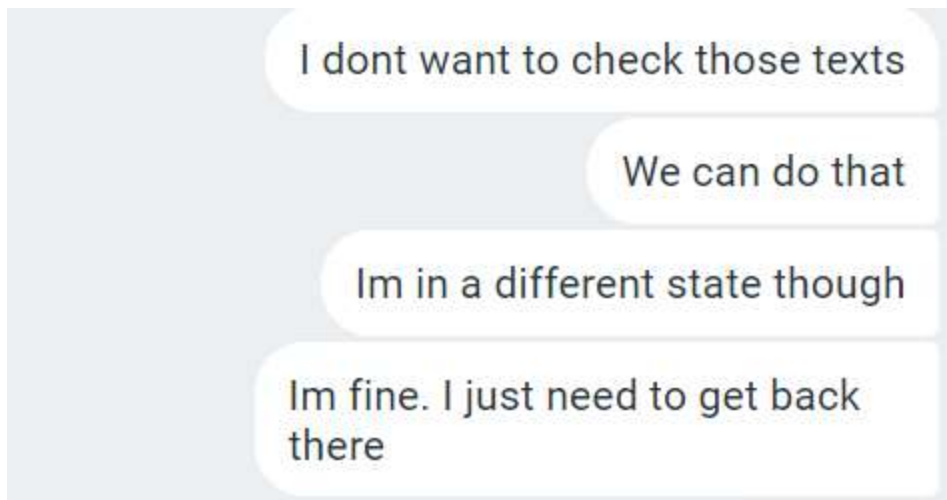
I freeze. Does he know? No. He can't. I just give him a thumbs up as I open the door to my room, not even turning around.

Fuck, I'm doing something that's weird. My world's entirely different now.

I shut the door behind me and just sit down on the bed. I stare forward but don't really look. I take a look at my hands, grey dust still coats my fingers, making them feel gritty and dirty. Ugh. I'll wash them later. I take a deep breath in and out, letting the jitters disperse. I check my phone. The texts from Firio are there.



I notice the two-digit number next to Tommy's muted name.



I type one last message.



I put my phone down, plug it into the wall outlet and power it completely off. The smell of workout sweat coats the inside of my nostrils. Ugh. Let's get into the shower before I do anything else. Still, good that I was able to get

some exercise. I'll sleep well tonight. Still, need to find something clean to change into. I pick up the piles of clothes surrounding my bed and throw them into the wicker hamper by the dresser. I see something copper glinting out of the corner of my eye. It's a lock on top of the bedside stand. I pick it up, pretty small with the keys in it. It's the lock for grandma's telegraph key. Why's this here? Not sure where I left it. Oh shit. Grampa saw it. Oh shit. My mind starts racing, after it just started to take a break.

Grandpa saw the lock. He knows that I have the key. He put it here. Why? I'm so confused. Why didn't he talk to me about it? You just kinda came here covered in dust and bruises. No derp he'll forget about it. Should I talk to him about this? Hell no. Let's just figure it out first. Also, definitely not dealing with that now. Wait! He fucking came in here and messed with my stuff! What the hell this is so messed up. Wait, I'm messing with his dead wife's stuff. The hell, that's kinda creepy of me to do. No, really creepy. Why the hell did I do that? Well, I was bored. I was desperate and not in my right mind. Whatever. I'll just deal with this later.

I take another deep breath. In, out, and come back to now. The carpet is fuzzy and soft underneath my feet. My clothes are slightly damp. Things are sticking in annoying places. My body is workout sore, a good sore. There are some hairs in my face. There are cicadas buzzing outside the closed window. All right. I'm back. Reset.

I grab a bunch of my clothes and head to the shower. My body screams for rest and sleep. Yeah, just a shower and a nap. Just don't think about this or her or anything. I open the door to the bathroom.

As I turn off the water, I feel everything start to clear up. I wipe my eyes with my sleeve and sniffle the last bit of leaking snot back into my nose. I shove the shower curtain aside. I wash my face with the fluffy towel sitting on the counter. It has that weird smell of a towel used twice. Dirty, but what the ever. Done with this bullshit. I wipe everything off, put on some clean clothes and just let myself breathe.

In... Out... In... Out... In... Out.

I throw the towel back onto the counter to be used for a fourth time and walk out the room. Head out into the hallway, walking toward the kitchen.

Grandpa is there, sitting with a book and a mug. It's decorated with lines of color, like a rainbow, painted on by a grade schooler. The first bit of real color in this off-white house.

He sits at the table, which is covered by a white tablecloth of course. I pull out the pine wood chair, so pale that it looks almost white. I sit to the left of him, one chair between us.

"Hey," I say.

Grandpa looks up from his book, thick with a gray cloth cover, none of that plastic with the actual cover picture on it.

“Hello, Patricia.”

“What do you have going on today?” I ask.

“Well, I don’t think there’s too much,” he looks to me. Are his eyes puffy or are those just the wrinkles? “I’ll probably read, maybe head to town to grab some groceries.” Grandpa puts down his book and slides over a plate of two eggs, sunny side up with hard yolks; toast-dark brown, almost black, and bacon, the one thing not overcooked.

“I can also show you some hiking trails, if you want. They’ll be good for wandering, without having to worry about getting lost or hurt,” Grandpa smiles at me. I look down at the plate.

“Thanks, Grandpa.”

Then, I grab a fork from the bouquet at the center of the table, and open my mouth filled with unbrushed teeth and eat breakfast. “You’re welcome,” he says. “I’m always happy to cook for a hungry customer.” He takes a long sip from his mug. “Mmmm, you always gotta love that loose leaf.”

I nod along, stuffing the food down.

Grandpa stands up and rinses the mug out in the sink. “I’m glad you’re okay.” He says. I notice him glance down at my boots. “Actually, I just remembered. There’s some business I need to take care of down at the VA’s. So, I’ll head out now.

Grandpa grabs his keys and walks out the door.

Chapter 10

- --- .. --. / / . - . - . . . / .. / ... - --- . - . . - . / - --- .. - - . - . /
 - - / - - - / . - - . . . - . / . - . / - . . . - / . - . - . . - --- / - /
 - - . . . - / - --- / - / - - . - . - . - / - .. - - - - . - .

I wake up and roll out of bed. My bare feet are engulfed by the too fuzzy floor. The sun shines straight through the window and into my face. Damn it. Who the hell decided that the sun should force me awake every morning? Old assholes. I look out. Wait, afternoon sun. Oh yeah, I took a nap. My mouth tastes dry and mucus-y and I feel disoriented. What the hell was going on? Water first. I start walking over to my boots, but my foot connects with something hard. Well shit. The pain lances up my toe and into my leg. Shit, I push it aside with the side of my foot. I need my boot. The thing clacks against the metal zippers of my bag, like a Cajon with a drumstick, but smaller and with a higher-

Wait a minute. I look down at the wooden object. The memories of the previous twenty or so hours come back along with the soreness of bruises and pain from scrapes. My breathing quickens. That was real? Wait, maybe not. It's probably just the first part and I woke up after hallucinating the Morse, but that doesn't match the soreness. Whatever, I get sore from weird things. That's

completely not real. Well that sucks. It was fun there. But there is a silver lining. Maybe Greg and Judy are hallucinations as well. Fuck those two in particular.

I bend down and grab the box by its opening. Something tugs from inside me. No, it's more a leaking motion. Something like when you're recovering from sickness and hack up a huge ball of mucus, blow your nose and the stuffiness goes away all at once. But this time the mucus was a good, "tasty?" thing, pouring out from somewhere that's definitely somewhere you haven't felt before. Like that. Maybe I am too wordy. Thoughts for later. For now, that feeling is going out of my body, through my arm and leaking into the box. It's some kind of green and brown swirling mixture.

I should probably scream. But at this point, I'm too tired, I haven't had my coffee, and I'm just done with this. All I can think of is how much of a dick that slime was before I broke that stupid orb. It deserves to get shlorped into the box.

I set the goo'd container down on the ground away from my bag, or anything that it could stain... other than this dumbass carpet. Then, I grab my boots from the corner of the bed and slide them on, then, dig into my bag for the telegraph and yank it out.

.... .-.. .-.. --- HELLO

I tap out to Nux and listen for a reply.

Nothing. Nothing for a good couple of minutes.

Well fuck. I know that was real, glancing to the slime in the box. I set my hand on the wooden knob of the telegraph key again.

.... . -.- HEY

No reply. Well how the hell did I get it to work in the first place? Or did the Talent inside just run out? I think back to when it started, angry, the bench. The vow?

I consider the possibility. I'm not sure. The vow doesn't really make sense. Oh, I wished for a way out.

"I wish I had somebody to explain this to me," I say and tap.

.... . -.. -.. --- HELLO

Nothing.

Maybe something else? Oh, the pangram!

... .-. .-. / --- ..- / -... -.. .- -.. -.- / --- ..- .- .- -... / .--- ..- ..- .- / -- -.-
/ ...- --- .-

SPHINX OF BLACK QUARTZ JUDGE MY VOW and then -.. -.. ---

HELLO

The house starts creaking, birds outside chirp, and the combined creaking and chirping form a rapid, almost panicked message, almost too fast for me to understand. I can't translate that fast. I grab a pen and get ready to scribble in the margins of Fahrenheit 451.

.- ..- --- / / .- ..- .- .- / .- .- .- / -.- --- ..- WHO WHERE ARE YOU

I translate the writing, much slower than the actual tapping. I decipher the morse again, making sure I did it right.

.. - ... / -- . / ..-. .-. ---- -- / -.-. - .-. .-. -.- ITS ME FROM YESTERDAY

I tap it out slowly, hoping that the person on the other end matches.

.. / -- . - / - . ---- / ---- -. / -.-. - .-. .-. -.- / .- --- / .- .-. . / -.- ---- ..- I

MET NO ONE YESTERDAY WHO ARE YOU

Fuck Okay... I barely keep up. That's not like Nux. Did this thing connect me to somebody else? I tap back.

.- - --- / / - WHO IS THIS

The message comes back right as I finish mine. I rush to grab the pen and start noting down.

-.- - ---- ..- / ..-. .. .-. ... - YOU FIRST

/ .. -- / .-. .- - IM PAT

I tap back. The creaks and chirps change, sounding more demanding, professional this time, harsh.

- . - - - / . - . - - ..- -. NOT ENOUGH

Fuck this, I'm not dealing with this kind of bull this early in the morning. Let's just say it, throw it out there.

.- /- -- .- -. A HUMAN

There is a long silence before the reply.

.- --. . / .- .-. . / -.- ---- ..- WHERE ARE YOU

Nah, not telling them.

Close enough. I'm not wasting more time or letters on the equivalent to a butt dial. I speak, "Connect me to Nux" and tap out the sphinx pangram. Then I tap:

.- .-. . / -.- - - - ..- / .-. .-. .-. ARE YOU REAL

The slow but sharp reply is beautiful to my ears.

- - - ..- / -.- - - - ..- .-. .-. . / .. / .- - - / - - - .- / -.- - - - ..- .-. .-. / .. / - - . - / .- /-. .- / .- - - .- -.- .- / .-. .-. .- / -.- - - - / .. .-. / .. / .- .- ... -.- OF COURSE I AM HOW COULD I GET A HEART ATTACK LIKE NOW IF I WASN'T

I grin at Nux's sarcasm. Yeah, he's a cool guy. Then tap out another message.

.... - - - .- / -.. - - - / .. / - - . - / - - - / -.- - - - ..- HOW DO I GET TO YOU?

The wind outside picks up, swishing the trees and causing the house to creek, creating the specific rhythms of Morse.

.... - - - .- / - /-. .-. / - - - ..- .-. .-. / .. / -.- .- - - .- /- - - . / .- .- -.- HOW THE HELL SHOULD I KNOW? SAME WAY?

I grab my bag and tap out one last reply.

.. .-. .-. / - .-. -.- ILL TRY

I look outside, toward the forest and that weird portal thing. There's something moving by the tree line, not like an animal, somebody? Maybe Grandpa? Not sure. Could be one of his friends, coming over for some tea or something. I don't want to explain anything. I grab my phone and head outside.

The summer breeze greets me. That shape is still there. Whatever, I'll check who it is. I walk over to it and notice that I can see right through. This thing is translucent. What? It just stands there, staring. It's an old lady wearing some kind of formal pink gown and pearls. Her face is wrinkled and empty. No expression and the eyes are closed.

I take out the telegraph and tap out to Nux. --. --- ... - GHOST

--- -. -.- -.--- OKAY

he replies

--- -. /-. . ONE HERE

I tap back. The ghost still stands there, not moving, just staring. It doesn't even acknowledge me.

.--- - WHAT

The wind shakes the branches around the ghost. Some touch it, not going through.

--- -.--- / --- ..- BY HOUSE

I reply. It doesn't seem to be a threat. Has it been around this whole time, and I can only see it now because of some weird Talent kind of stuff?

-. --- - / .-. .. --. - NOT RIGHT

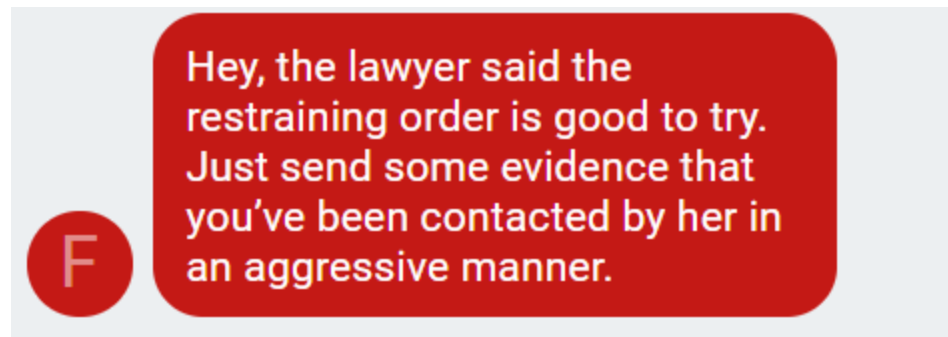
Well shit

-.-. --- -- . COME

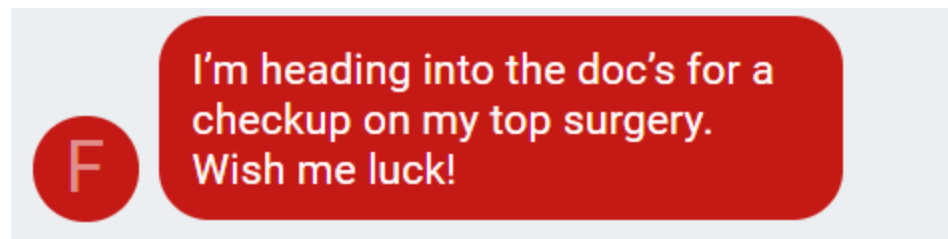
he continues.

I leave the ghost to book it over to the portal. Yeah. Seems like the thing is okay for now. The hell does Nux mean by, not right?

I see that weird tear, as the sun streams through, lighting up the hard dirt around the roots of the trees. Before I go through, I turn my phone on. I don't want to miss anything from Firio before I go in. It finally finishes starting up, and I look at my texts. The number of unread texts from Tommy reached three digits. Doesn't that lady ever give up? There are also some from unknown numbers. Fuck. Okay. Just ignore them. They're probably from her. I screenshot the screen to show the numbers. Idk evidence for later maybe. There's a message from Firio.



There's one more that just came in twenty minutes ago.



I feel my face break into a genuine smile. And think back to when he came out of it.

I was there with his mom. We were let in while they were bringing Firio back to consciousness. He had already been on T for a while, and his voice had already changed, gotten way deeper. I also noticed the stubble on his chin and neck. He'd already gone through a bunch of changes, but this was going to be the big one. No more binding for him. There were a bunch of large bandages on his chest, and it was flat! A bunch of tubes stretched from his arms and under his blankets out into machines. Firio's mom and I looked at each other and squealed. Firio was going to freak. One of the doctors turned a dial attached to one of the tubes and shortly after, his head started to loll around. He was like this for a minute, but when he opened his eyes, the first thing he did was look down. The expression on his face was priceless. He was so fucking happy!

With a grin, I put my phone back in my pocket and push through the portal. I come out in that same covered space, light streaming down the staircase, into this chamber. I take a moment to actually look at the area. It's made from the same gray stone that the rest of the ruins are from and just as weirdly shaped, like a giant's play-doh sculpture. Though, this area looks like it was scooped out of the ground, rather than stacked up. The floor feels lumpy and uneven. There are diagonal scratches by the bottom of the walls. I walk over to one of them. There seem to be designs pressed into the stone, but it's too dark to quite make it out. The staircase splits the room in half, though, it looks like the portal is right in front of some rounded rubble, but the rubble perfectly shapes around it, with crumbly scratches on the edges of the round

stone. I can make out some triangular symbols on these. I touch one of them, and it shifts. Okay, not messing with that! Let's just head out.

I run up the stairs, over to the side of one of the other destroyed buildings and see Nux. "Hey," I call out "what do you mean by not right?"

He flits up off of the stone block that he was sitting on. "Well howdy doo, don't be too formal or anything like that. No titles or anything."

"Oh sorry my liege," I say, "Please answer my humble question, Lord Nuxinor." I don't sprinkle sarcasm. It pours this time.

"S'all right." He grins, "Just messing with you. But yeah, that's pretty strange with the ghost. Like, those are pretty rare. I've been seeing more and more around here."

"Well, this is the first one I've seen ever. Can they go to my world or something?" I ask

"Not sure, haven't ever been there," his brows furrow with concentration, "Though, they may be using the same way you're coming back and forth. Either way, some of the elders in my village should be able to help. They might know something from the last time humans have come through."

"Just need to get the elves off your back, right?" I reply.

"Exactly."

"I'm in. What do you need?"

Chapter 11

.. / .-. .--.. / -- .-. .-. .-. / -- - / -.- .-. .. .-. .-. .-. .-. / -.. .-. .-. .-. / -... ..-
 - /-. .-. .--. .-. / .-. .-. - / .-. .-. .-. .-. .-. / .-. .-. .-. .-. .-. / .-. .-. .-. / ... - .-.
 - .-. .-. .-. .-. / .-. .-. / .-. .-. .-. .-. .-. .-. / - .-. .-. .-. .-. / - / -.- .-. .. .-. .-. .-. .-

The forest is filled with way more life and green than I'd ever seen anywhere else. More leaves, grass, and roots everywhere. The ground is entirely covered by little sprouts, bushes, trees, grass, vines, shrubs, saplings. There's no end to it. Everything just swishes and grabs at my pants as I wade through the sea of green. It's supernaturally bright, even under the tree canopy and humid but not uncomfortably so. It's some kind of paradise, not a beachy and palm-tree one, but like the ultimate temperate forest, and it is hella annoying. Like, I can appreciate it at a distance, but actually trying to move around here and keep relatively quiet is impossible, and I keep having to push stuff out of the way.

"Hey, how close are we" I shout-whisper.

Nux zips out from the underbrush, right up to my ear. He's almost noiseless, except for a slight clattering from his wings coming through a small gap in the leaves. "Shhh, you're already really loud, tromping around like that. They'll hear you."

I turn my head, nose smacking him in the arm. He's really close. I whisper, "I'm doing my best here. Okay, then just stop, stay here." He says, "I'll be back. I'll see how many there are now. If all works out, we can head in and maybe even kill them before they can prepare."

"Kill"

"Kill?"

"Kill!?"

"What the fuck?" I hiss. Kill. That word sets off a chain reaction in my brain.

I'm standing over him, my face is screwed up in rage. I can't think I can't see anything but his limp body on the ground. I keep punching over and over. There are a few teeth missing from his jaw. Fuck that hateful smile. There's blood everywhere. My fingers are probably broken. Everything should hurt. Fuck this. I stand up and start kicking him. I smash his ribs and stomp on his stomach. There's somebody screaming, "you're gonna kill him." Another yells, get the gun. A third just wails. Then I feel someone grab me by the shoulders.

I come back to the world, pushing leaves out of my way, and stepping over roots. Everything tickles and pricks at me, giving me touch to latch onto, the overwhelming greens let me just keep my eyes forward. Buzzing is all around with various insects, almost like the rhythms of the cicadas back at Grandpa's.

The seething hatred burns through my body. That invisible space boils as my stomach burns. Nux is staring at me weird. Fuck, another flashback. He caused that! He caused that, and Nux just reminded me of it.

Breathe! In, out. In, out. In, out. I let the breaths keep me in control. One more. In, out. I meet Nux's eyes with a glare.

"I'm not fucking killing anybody," I say.

"Shhh," Nux's face screws into rage, "Of course you can do it. You're human!" He stares at me like that's supposed to explain things. "When you humans came last time, it was so easy! That's all you wanted!"

Control. Breathe. In, out. In... out... I keep my voice from breaking, despite the water in my eyes. "No, I have no clue what humans you were talking about, earlier, but I have never killed and will not be killing anytime soon. Or ever for that matter. So, get that out of your tiny fucking head." I hiss back, not quieting down, "Actually, screw this! I'm done." I brush him off my shoulder and start walking back the way we came. I'll figure out where the portal was and just avoid this guy.

"Okay, okay, you're not killing, fine. you're helping either way. Those elves want slaves to extract Talents. I could trade a human for the freedom of my village. I really don't want to do that to you, but my family comes first."

I turn around. Nux has a little needle-like sword drawn and hovers with it pointed toward me.

"Please," he says as his expression softens, "Just help me."

I stop. In, out. In, out. That invisible space keeps boiling, “You’re really doing this to me?”

His face looks pained. “If I have to.”

In, out. In, out. I need to run. I need to escape this. A small part of my brain, that little bit that’s letting me calm down speaks. No, he’s too fast. He’ll catch up to me, and I have no idea what Talents he has. I can’t fight him off. I barely have any idea of the way back. Hell, he could just follow me and find the portal. Then everybody’d be screwed. Just keep control. Breathe. In, out. In, out.

“Fine, but I’m not fighting,” I say

“All right. I have a backup plan.”

We walk away, heading back to the ruins. I make sure to keep breathing. I need to calm down. Fuck, that was a lot. I thought I had control over that. Fuck. That was too far. I need to get away from those triggers. What was it that triggered? No. Not thinking about it now. I tromp through the forest. My too tight boots tromp on the bushes and grass, stomping everything in my way. They’re here. I’m wearing them. I’ll be fine.

“All right,” Nux says, interrupting my thoughts, “We’re far enough. So, I’ll lay out my plan.” He flutters around to stand on a tree branch at eye level.

“Okay,” I mutter. Not looking at him.

He continues, “Those elves have a Talent that allows them to increase their physical senses, sight, hearing, and kinesthetic. They can find us easily and will be able to either chase us down or avoid us. I already have a weapon to

deal with them, but I need time to hit them with it. However, now that we have you, we can make a complex Talent.”

Nux speaks with big gestures and excitement in his voice. I feel a little confused.

“Complex Talents?” I ask.

“Like combining Talents to make more powerful ones,” he says, “It’s something that humans can do!”

“Ookaaay,” I say, “You sure you’re not making this up? ‘Cause it seems like humans are just way too good at this stuff.”

“Well, I mean, they kinda are.” Nux shrugs. “Especially these days,” He says, “Now for the plan, I was thinking we could create a thunder and lightning one, something that hurts their eyes and ears, so they can’t use their Talent.”

“Wait, what do elves do?” I ask

“Their talent lets them boost their senses, all of them,” Nux says, “even kinesthetic. So, you can’t hide around them, and once you’re found, they can run way faster than you.”

“So, you want to make a flashbang to shut down the finding you part,” I say.

“Exactly,” he says, “Actually, flashbang is a good term for it.”

I grin at that. Apparently, those hours of hanging out playing video games weren’t wasted.

Nux continues, “There are a bunch of Talents in my village’s stores. We should have rapidity and noise Talents from that trader a while ago. However, we will need light. As long as we get that and find a way in and out of the village, we’ll be good.”

“Okay, how do we get it?” I ask

“There should be some glowing mushrooms in a cave nearby that we can harvest,” he says.

“All right; let’s do it,” I say.

Chapter 12

.. / - --- ..- .-. -.. / --- -.. / --. .-. . - .-. -. / / - --- .-. -.. / -- . / .- ... --- ..- -
 / -. / .-. --- ...- .-. -.- / --. .- .- .-. . -. / / .- .-. ... --- / - --- .-. -.. / -- . /
 -- - / - / -. - .-. .-. .-. --- .- / .- .- ... / - --- --- / -... .- .. -.. -

I shimmy out of the crack in the cave wall, glad I'm not claustrophobic. Dim, reflected light I couldn't see before defines the area just barely enough that I think, think! that I won't eat shit walking across.

“Hey Nux, exactly how much of the light Talent do we need?”

His voice echoes from further in the cave. “All of it! We barely have enough as it is! Besides, you'll be fine!”

“Says the guy who can fly!”

“Says the guy who's saving his Talent and hoofing it like you peasants!”

Well fuck. I pick my way across, keeping to the least dark areas. My tight combat boots grip wherever they connect with the ground. I almost trip a couple times but recover before Nux can hear it and give me shit.

On the other side, I tug at the rope we found here and look up. It hangs over the edge of the cliff, like twenty feet up. The ledge overhangs a smooth wet wall by about a foot. It holds. I set my right boot against the wall, then promptly remember what happened two years ago at summer camp. I cringe at my stupidity. “Dumbass, running up the wall like some ninja. At least it got

Tommy to shut up,” I mutter to myself. Still, it was nice, I think. At least, it was before the trial. I take my foot off the wall and jump onto the first knot on the rope, climbing like a non-dumbass. I reach up to the next knot, then pull myself up using my core and arm strength to get my boots up and onto another knot. Fuck not working out. Asshole boys saying I’ll look ugly. Bet you couldn’t pull this off.

It takes me seventeen of these inch-worming motions to get to the overhang, and by that point, my entire upper body is burning. I scramble to the edge and my muscles shake as I pull myself over and onto firm ground by the mouth of the cave. The whole rope flops flat, yanking a little more at the stalagmite it’s tied around. I lay there for a minute, panting, letting my muscles rest after that abuse. Then, I stand, using a stalagmite to pull myself up and walk out into the sun.

My shoes thump on stone and crunch on gravel before swishing through tall grass. Breathing hard, I put down my load, and sit in the sun, warming myself while I wait for Nux to get here and tell me where we’re heading next.

Two small crunches vibrate behind me, like a squirrel and its mate landing or a pair of empty boots thrown to the ground. My eyes are closed, just taking in the light and warmth of what seems to be an eternal spring in The Forest.

“Are you the one who I should find?”

Lightning sparks through my sore, exhausted body. My eyes shoot open and I see a face leaning over me. As I scabble away, I ask “Who are you?”

The person attached to the face is tall. They hold a weapon in their hand, a curved stick with a notch at the end and set of long, thin spears are strapped to their waist. They wear a tight vest with cloth sleeves, hanging off their upper arms. A belt tightens loose pants that cuff close at their calves, but their feet are left bare. “I already told you who I was when we talked earlier,” they say, “and you said you would tell me how you did it when I found you,” they hook their weapon onto the back of their belt, “Apparently, it would take too long with the method you used.”

I stand up, the top of my head only coming up to their chin. The relaxed energy of this person makes me uneasy. Their face looks sharp, pointed nose, chin, and ears. An elf. “And why would I tell that to somebody who I just met?” I ask

They smile with thin lips, “Well, we didn’t just meet. We talked this morning, but I see what you mean. I suppose an exchange is in order. I can tell you some things that you need to know in exchange for the information on how you contacted me.”

My mind is blazing, racing to figure this person out. Their extremely angular features disguise their gender and any sort of expression. Pointed ears, though. An elf? Like from *The Hobbit*? Shit, literature is actually useful? Still, fuck you Ms. Thornbrook, not in the way you said. Hey, back to the situation at hand. What should I say?

“What could you have that I need to know?” I reply.

“Many things,” they grin, “Though, I suppose you would want something directly applicable now, rather than long term. You seem to be that kind of person. I’ll give you something small to whet your appetite. Your companion, Nux, will call for your help soon. There will just happen to be something he needs to fight. He is hateful of elves. So, I must leave before he returns.”

I stare hard at them. “I don’t believe you,” I say.

Their thin lips split into a smile. “That’s fair. I suppose for now, we will suffice with actual introductions before my statement is proven true.” They meet my eyes with their deep hazel ones. Fuck, they have nice eyes. “I am Agot, the chief of trade at an elven outpost nearby. And you are?”

A little flustered, I spit out, “I’m Pat. I use she/her pronouns.” What should I do about this? Should I attack them? Wait. I only got info from Nux. Always two sides to a story.

“Are pronouns accolades in human culture now?” Agot asks, standing up to their full, tall, height, interrupting my train of thought. Their lips play into a slight grin, their shoulders, uncovered by the vest, are back and relaxed. They seem confident and at ease.

“No. just identity,” I say, taken aback, my face heating up “I’m just here, I guess. What are your pronouns?”

They smile, “I identify with the They pronoun. Odd, I suppose not all humans are obsessed with rank,” they say.

“Not really.”

A voice echoes from the cave. “Hey, Pat! I need some help! I found mushrooms, but there’s something mad about it!”

“What the fuck?” I turn to look at the cave in surprise.

“Ahh, quicker than I expected. That is my signal to leave. Feel free to talk to me again with that mysterious method. I will be listening.”

I turn back, and they’re almost at the treeline already. I see their eyes glimmer and - Wait! Was that a wink! Did they just fucking wink at me?!?

Bullshit!!!

“Uh - Sure, bye,” I stammer out, my mouth completely disconnecting from my brain.

I rush over to the mouth of the cave, to the edge of the cliff inside the cavern and hear the echoes of many warbling squeaks. Then, Nux comes into the light, running on foot with a horde of bat-like creatures with beaks and feathers, behind him. They screech as they dart down and divebomb the little pixie.

“Nux, just fly! Get out of there!” I yell.

“Hell no!” He yells, ducking down as a creature half his size swoops overhead, “being on the ground is the only thing keeping them from surrounding me. Now get them away! Fight!”

I look around for some kind of rock or weapon I can throw at the mass. Just some loose pebbles and sand. My mind racing for a solution. Damn it nothing. Wait. Maybe the sand can do something? Maybe they use

echolocation? There are stones too. Need to figure out how to get it over there, though. No leaves or pouches or anything. I feel the adrenaline in my body flare. That invisible organ starts to churn. I notice it. Maybe the pushing Talent can help. Though I haven't messed with it much. Have to try it sometime.

I scrape up the sand and gravel in my hand and draw on the invisible organ. It squishes the Talent out, forcing the liquid energy into my body, channeling down my spine and through my arm, into the tips of my fingers and out. It builds up in the air just outside my palm. I toss the sand up like a tennis serve and release the energy, pointing it toward the bats.

The gravel, pebbles, and whole dusty mass launches down toward the bats and Nux. I yell "Duck!" as it rockets through the air. The bats scatter, flying away from this seeming wall flying toward them.

Nux gets beaned by a pebble and knocked off his feet but hops up with his string of mushrooms trailing behind him. He leaps into the air and flies up the cliff, away from the dispersed bat-things. "Go, go, go!"

We bolt outside the cave, rushing into the bright sunlight, away from the trees. I feel the exhaustion slowing me down, forcing me to trail behind Nux. We get halfway to the trees before stopping.

"Great job beating them away, Pat." none of Nux's signature sarcasm is present in his voice. I catch the shadow of a person in the green of the trees as we head back to the ruins.

Nux, flits onto my shoulder. “Not happening. I can hide, and you’re in this now. I need to keep an eye out for you to make sure you will still help with freeing my village.”

“No, too much of a risk. If anyone sees you, we’re fucked. There’ll be too many questions to answer. It’s fine.” I smile at him. I have to get away from this guy. “I’ll come back.”

“No, I’m coming, and that’s final.”

“Fine. Just stay out of sight. I’m not answering questions if you get seen.” I run away from the wall, forcing my sore body forward. I rush over to the portal seeing it by the small series of walls around it, down the stairs, and step through. Ugh, that sliminess gets worse and worse each time through. It glorps on me a little longer this time, stretching out further as I push through.

Immediately my phone dings a bunch of times with texts. Then, an old man’s voice calls in the distance “Patricia! Patricia! Where are you?”

Fuck.

I run some distance from the portal and call back. “Hello?”

“Patricia!” I recognize the voice now. Greg.

“I’m over here!” I reply.

I crest a small hill and see him, an old man in rubber boots and suspenders. Well fuck. Of course it’s fucking Greg. His deep frown makes his face look like its melting off his skull. He’s pissed.

“Get over here! Your grandpa’s worried sick! Why didn’t you come back?”

Anger pokes through the wrinkles again, no concern or worry at all.

I breathe hard, swallowing “I got lost in the forest. I couldn’t find my way back and had to sleep on the ground! I just woke up and heard your voice!” The dirt on my jeans and shirt should help sell the story.

“Well either way, you’re in big trouble. Now I’m taking you back.” Greg latches his hand onto my wrist and drags me out of the forest.

I look back to see if Nux is still around. I can’t find him. Hopefully, he’ll get lost. Probably not. I need to get out of this. I need to escape.

Greg’s firm grip holds my arm, pulling me forward like I’m a misbehaving toddler. I yank, but he holds firm and glares into my eyes.

“Missy, you have a bad habit of wanderin’ off. I am not letting you go until you are back at George’s house. Now just come like a good little girl.”

I stare him back. Okay, now, he’s gone too far. He’s attacking and verbally assaulting me. I feel the steel toes of my boots with each step. No! Breathe. In, out. In, out. You can’t do this. I breathe. In, out. Brent always said that getting angry and fighting will never work out for me. Just go along with it.

I walk forward, not looking down, just forward. He walks too. My wrist hurts, he’s squeezing so hard. I can feel the bruises forming. There are no signs of Nux. I go faster, coming alongside the old fart and a little ahead of his pace, daring him to tell me to walk behind. I keep breathing, making sure to keep in

control. We break the treeline and come up to the house. Greg finally lets me go and I look at my wrist. My wrist has a dark ring around it. Absolutely wonderful.

I walk up to the door.

I take a deep breath and hold it for a second. Hot muggy air fills my lungs. Okay. Let's think this through. He'll yell at me or call Dad. Either way is whatever.

"Hurry up," Greg yells.

I hiss my breath out. Just deal with it. He's an old asshole spouting shit. I glare behind me to Greg, grasp the latch. I breathe one more time and push. The door creaks open with an even rhythm, not Morse. Nux is still following me, probably. Whatever. I step inside and leave all that behind.

The living room is empty. I look down at my boots. They're really muddy. I can't clean them right now. Too long. The living room is carpeted. He'll get even angrier about me tracking mud in the house. I grimace. I need them. No, fuck that. I'm strong without these. I'll be fine. I have to grow out of this shit anyway. These things are already three years old. They'll fall apart before too long. I kneel down and grab the laces of my right boot, untie, and loosen them. Okay. Breathe. In, out. In, out. Just take your foot out. I weakly pull at it. No. My breathing hitches. I could clean them off. It's fine. I start wiping my hands at the bottom of the soles. A lot comes off, but there's plenty left there. Still plenty to mess up the carpet. Breathe. Don't forget to breathe. In, out. I yank out my foot. Oh shit. I feel my bare sock cool as it hits the air. In, out. In, out. I see my

bare fucking sock. I take a breath. In, out. It reeks. I feel like I'm drowning! In, out. Shit. In, out. Calm down, let your breaths slow! In, out. I'm out here and I have one boot off. Breathe. Slow it down. you're okay In. out... In... Out. Its fine; let's get the other one. I untie the boot, breathe a couple quick breaths, and pull the boot off before I can think. I am now barefoot in the mudroom. Okay. I look down at the muddy boots. Breathe. In, out. I'm fine. I walk away, feeling naked. I leave my boots by the door for the first time in two months. It's okay. I'll put them on and clean when the conversation is over. Something clangs from the kitchen. I jump. Breathe! Keep calm! In, out. It's okay. I pad over. My feet are cold and light and unprotected. I feel the floor creaking under my feet for the first time. I step onto the fuzzy carpet, then on the hard tile of the kitchen. I look up. Grandpa is bent over, closing the oven. He stands up and turns around. He looks me up and down staring at my feet for a second before saying anything.

“Hello Patricia.” Grandpa's face is unreadable behind that beard.

“Hello Grandpa,” I say. My feet ache without the tightness of the boots.

“Are you okay?”

“G- Greg needs to talk to you,” I spit out, pointing. That name tastes dusty on my tongue. My body feels awkward I can't even speak right. I should get my boots, put them back on.

He doesn't speak and looks at my wrist.

“I'm fine.”

“Who did that?” he says, pointing to the bruise from Greg grabbing me.

“Greg,” I say.

“All right. I’ll take care of him. Just make sure the kettle doesn’t boil over while I do.”

“Okay.”

“Thank you.” He walks out the door, passing me.

I walk up to the kettle. Okay. I’m fine. One big breath. In, out. Think about the kettle that’s simple. It’s painted like a giraffe with a little plastic head on the “neck” of the handle. Okay. In, out. I’m fine. Grandpa’ll probably pull the “I’m not mad, just disappointed” speech. Then I hear the yelling.

My neck tenses hard. Grandpa screams “Get the fuck out!” Then Greg yells back. I can hear “That bitchy brat!” but everything else is too muffled. It’s fine. Breathe! In, out. This doesn’t matter anyway. Grandpa’s pissed at Greg not me. Even if he is, other than living here for a few days, I have no idea who Grandpa is. He was always to the side or back. It’s fine. Breathe to your rhythm. In, out. I’ll be fine. A train like whistle startles me out of my thoughts. Steam escapes the giraffe’s open mouth. I turn off the gas burners underneath and the sound tapers off. I hold my hand over the spout. Hot, wet steam floats into my palm. I pull it back when it burns, rubbing my hand on my jeans. The yelling stops.

The door creaks to a close, and the deadbolt clicks shut. I hear Grandpa take a deep breath. Here it comes. Grandpa walks back into the kitchen. “Is the water ready?”

“It whistled,” I hold it up.

“Good, what kind of tea do you like?”

“I dunno, I’ve never really had tea.”

“Let’s start you out with some lemony green.”

“Okay.”

“Feel free to sit down. I’ll be out in a minute.”

“Uh-Sure.”

I lied to myself. I need my boots. I rush back to the mudroom and grab them, cuddling them to my chest. Fine. I feel cold mud leak into my shirt and onto my pants. I don’t care. They’re here. I choke down my breaths. In, out. I have my boots. I’m fine. I walk back into the living room and sit down on the green couch, the boots clutched to my chest. The cushion engulfs my body, my bare, cold socks don’t quite reach the floor. He’s not angry yet. Just keep it quiet. Let him get it out. I’ll be okay. Just keep breathing. The dripping of pouring water drums from the kitchen followed by two tears of paper. Despite the softness of the cushions, I feel a slight vibration from the shuffling steps of grandpa’s slippered feet. No. I’m shaking. I’m fine. Breathe. In, out. You’re fine. You have the boots still. He steps out of the kitchen holding two mugs with little tags hanging over their brims. He shuffles over, setting one of the mugs in front of me and taking a seat on the opposite couch.

“All right.” He breathes in and out. “God.” He looks down. “Now I know what my parents must have felt when I signed up for the army.” He looks back

up to my face, ignoring the boots. His eyes look watery. “But, I want to handle it better than they did. I volunteered to your parents and the court to take you in so you would have a second chance, one that they never gave me. So, here’s what I want. I just have three questions. Once they’re answered, you can go or stay or do whatever you need. Okay?” he asks.

I don’t say anything.

“I’ll just go on, then. First.” His voice is shaking. “Why didn’t you tell me you were leaving?”

I stutter, taken aback by the emotion in his voice, “I-I didn’t think that I’d be gone long. I mean – It was just a walk in the woods, like yesterday.” The half-lie feels numb coming from my mouth.

“That’s not true,” he says. I tense up. He’s calm now, with a steady voice and piercing gaze. He continues, “You weren’t here yesterday. But that’s not what you lied about. I understand this is something that you might get in trouble with, but I just need to know. You don’t have to say what it actually was you were doing, but I want to understand your side of things.”

“I- it was just a walk Grandpa.” Inside I’m screaming. I feel my eyes heat up.

“No. There was something else. Was it that thing at Greg and Judy’s?” His voice cracks. “I know that you have Agnes’s telegraph key.” His expression turns pleading. “You looked scared. Please, if there’s something going on, I want to know. I don’t want to be left in the dark again!” He clutches the cup in

his hands. “I- Sorry. That’s not the question. Let’s just move on to the next one if you can’t answer right now.” He takes another deep breath. “What did I do to make you want to run away?”

I don’t speak. I race through my mind for any reason I can say. “Nothing. I just...”

He looks down. He sniffs and wipes his nose on his sleeve. “O-okay. What do you want me to say to your parents? I need to say something to them. Do you want to leave?”

Yes! So, much yes! I need to get out of here! Away from the elves, Nux, Ghosts, this! I need to get away. I take a breath. In, out. No. In, out. No. This, with Grandma’s telegraph, ghosts, the other world... I need to figure it all out. Wings flutter amongst the photos in the armoire. I doubt Nux’d *let* me go. Even then, I need to figure out how Grandma’s telegraph fits into all of this. I need to figure all of this out. I take a deep breath in. I need to tell him something!

“No.” I let the air out. “I - I don’t know what’s really going on. But I don’t want to leave. I can’t leave. Can you just say I got lost or something? I don’t know what else tell them. I just - I just need to stay here.”

“Fine. I just tell me what’s going on.” His wrinkles become valleys of concern. He’s worried?

I open my mouth, but no sound comes out. How can I phrase this, so he doesn’t think it’s some childish bullcrap? Fuck just say something! “I’m not really sure. Honestly, it’s scary. I don’t know how to say this. I have no idea how this is

going to turn out. I'm sorry. I have to keep this vague. I don't know if anyone would believe me any other way." I let the boots droop a little in my arms, not gripping them as tight. By breathing evens, as if I were drowning with the secret.

"I see." He stops talking and just stares into the middle distance. "Did I ever tell you how Agnes and I met?"

"No?" My face screws up in confusion, and my mind races to figure out why he's talking about this now.

"It'll make sense in a minute." He takes a deep breath. "I was on duty in the area around Anju, searching for any bunkers the forces missed in the initial sweep after we took the ground. It had been a long day with my squad, and we were about to report back to base when I heard something. There was some kind of voice. We were all split up by this point. So, I don't know if it was real or if they could have heard it. But regardless, it sounded like a young woman saying to go up the hill and look for the waterfall." He breathes. "So, I did. That was one of the places where the captain said we didn't need to search, but I was hearing something. Better to be safe than sorry. Not halfway up the hill, there was a hole in the ground. It was part of some kind of cave system. I called Greg over and we found a bunker, right where the voice said." Grandpa's eyes are watering. "We opened that sucker up and it was some kind of laboratory. Those Reds never knew what hit 'em. We swept through and found a bunch of people. But I found the first. It was your Grandmother." He sniffs. "She was

sitting in a concrete room with a telegraph, notebook, and box. When I asked her if she was okay and what happened here. All she could say was ‘you came’ and ‘nobody would believe me.’”

Tears roll down Grandpa’s face at this point. “And I knew that those people hurt her so bad and, in a way, that nobody but her would understand. And that’s not fine, but I can’t change the history books.” He sniffs. “But this is now. You have her telegraph. So please! I will believe anything you say. I’m not going to let anybody to be hurt like that again! If somebody’s doing this to you, *I will stop them.*”

There’s fury in those last four words, pain and anger. I recognize it. His eyes glint like Grandma’s in that photo. He’s the same. It’s a different kind of feeling. I don’t know could ever feel it. And I don’t want to. His stare leaves me weak. I need to tell him everything.

“I found some kind of other world.” In the background, something flutters. Nux. Screw him. He’s part of this problem. “I don’t know what’s exactly going on, but I met some kind of pixie or fairy. He’s right behind you.”

Grandpa whips his head around. Catching Nux on the armoire, amongst the bright, colorful photos. He turns to look back at me. His anger only lessening a little. “I can see why you didn’t think I’d believe you. What is the issue?”

Something else moves, something out of the corner of my eye, something pale and translucent.

I whip my head over to it, and a misty form comes through the wall. It looks female, with a long white dress, with makeup and hair perfectly styled, topped all off with a floppy summer hat. Her face is wrinkled with age and smile lines that mark a happy satisfying life. She looks like she could have been one of Grandma's church friends, but no she wears a scowl of determination. She floats toward grandpa and me, right arm outstretched. It touches him on the shoulder. The hand sinks into his chest.

I yell "Get off him!"

Power surges from that newly discovered reservoir, throwing itself between the pale woman and Grandpa. With a whoosh, it explodes and sends the creature flying. Her hat flies off as she slams into a wall. On her forehead, there is something that shouldn't be there, a hole, a bullet hole straight through her head. It's clean. No blood or brains anywhere. The pit in my stomach fills with acid pushing itself up my throat. I grip my boots hard. Panic consumes me. I don't want to see the back of her head.

"Huh-" Grandpa jerks his head around and sees the thing. That deep fury reenters his face. "Get away from us you monster!" He jumps up and launches himself at the thing, his seventy-something year old body moving in ways only someone fifty years younger should. "Run! Get away from this thing!"

The form slides through the wall, into Grandpa's bedroom.

"Shit," Grandpa says and runs - Runs! to the bedroom door. I'm stunned. I can't move. He steps into action. Breathe! In, out. I shake my head and bolt into

the room. It's well decorated, a giant bed filled with pillows and unmade sheets now holds a body halfway into the mattress. Grandpa is in his closet, rustling around. "Fuck" Grandpa slides clothes aside as he searches for something in the closet. I need to help! How -

The bed explodes as the ghostly form rockets up, into the ceiling, falling on its feet on the wreckage of the bedspread.

A metallic sound cuts through the air as Grandpa pulls a sword from the closet. It looks like an old saber, something a military officer would wear to a ceremony. "Who are you? And why are you hurting my granddaughter?"

The ghost opens its mouth. A croaking voice comes out, half formed, as if the vocal cords had rotted. "Agnes wants you back."

I stand paralyzed at those words, and Grandpa's eyes go wide for a half second. But then he steps back and stabs the sword into the ghost's abdomen. "Shut up!" He screams.

The sword goes straight through, seemingly no resistance. The lady reaches toward him, touching his chest. The hand continues, going inside his body. I reach out my arm and try to pull from the invisible organ, but I can't. The liquid intensity turns to sludge as I panic. Grandpa steps aside, holding the sword inside the thing. It's fine. Grandpa can keep himself safe. Just breathe. In, out. The lady reaches out again, then looks more solid. The sword shoots out her side, a gray mist leaking from the wound. She looks down at her at her stomach and smacks Grandpa's head.

He falls onto the floor.

The ghostly being hisses “Agnes misses you.” My whole body clenches. I do the only thing left. I throw a boot. It slams into the ghost’s head. It falls over. I feel rage melt away my panic. I wheel around the bed, other boot in hand. I step over Grandpa and swing the steel toe down onto the ghost. It turns transparent. The boot passes halfway through. The lady turns back.

My boot explodes.

Metal and canvas flies everywhere. No. No. NO! I scream, “NO!” The invisible organ boils inside my body. I look at the ghost. It stands. It stands like Tommy did. I don’t have my boots it broke them. I punch it in the face. It turns transparent and I swing halfway through as a power explodes from my fist. The ghost rockets into and through the wall.

I breathe.

In, out.

In, out.

In, out.

It doesn’t come back. I turn and look at grandpa.

He’s on the floor. There’s blood on the floor. It soaks into my socks. He’s still.

I need to do something! Help! Call for help!

Nux touches my shoulder. I jump in surprise. He ignores it and says, “I’ll keep an eye out for that ghost. Take care of him.” And zips off.

I rip my phone out of my pocket and dial 911.

The phone rings twice before picking up.

“Hello, 911, what is your emergency?” A deep, calm, professional voice answers the phone.

My body and voice shake as I speak, “It’s my grandfather. He’s hurt! He was-” I interrupt myself and swallow. Breathe! In, out. Calm down. In, out. I can’t tell them anything about what happened.

“Okay, where are you?” The voice is steady, betraying no panic.

“I’m at my grandfather’s house. I don’t know the address,” I say

“All right. Stay calm. Is there a way you can find it?” the operator says.

My mind races. In, out. No not Amazon. I don’t have it written down. I rush out the front door. “It’s 2459!”

I can hear clacking on the other side of the line, “And what road?”

I don’t remember that either. “Shit shit shit.”

“Is there a letter or sign?” The operator asks.

I rush back inside, there should be some kind of letter in there. He’s the type. I walk back inside to see Nux tipping over a vase.

I mute myself on the phone. “Hey!” I say, “What the hell are you doing?”

Nux looks up. “This place looks too neat. You need a good story of a struggle.

“Well cool it!” I hiss, “This stuff matters to my grandfather!” I turn around and unmute myself.

Behind me, there's a crash as Nux finishes knocking the vase over.

"You cut out, and I heard a crash. Is there someone else there?" The operator's voice quickens. "Are you in danger?"

I take a second to glare at Nux before responding. He shrugs.

"Uh, no Nobody's here."

"It sounds like someone's there," they say.

I look at the table right by the door. There's a letter on it. "I have the letter," I say, changing the subject, "It's 2459 Warrens. We're out in Greenwoods!"

"Okay, an ambulance is on the way. Now stay on the line. We're going to run some basics of first aid on your grandfather," the operator says, like it's a normal Tuesday, "Can you do that?"

I nod, "Yes" and walk over to Grandpa.

"Your grandfather. Is he bleeding?" they ask.

I run back to him. There's another crash from the bedroom.

"Are you sure there's nobody there?" Their tone hardens.

"Yes. Things are just falling. It's fine," I say.

There's more clacking. "I'm going to dispatch police as well," the operator says.

"Fine. Fine. I think it was a robber." I throw in the lie, just something to get them off my back. I'm back to grandpa. I take a look at him. Oh fuck. What's going on I can't deal with this.

Calm down. Just the facts. What is going on? Look and feel. What are the most important things?

“He’s on the ground he’s knocked out,” I say. “He’s bleeding, I think, and there are bruises from what I can see.” I put my ear to his chest, hearing his heart and feeling its rise and fall. “His heart’s beating and he’s breathing. But something’s crunching when he does that. He isn’t coughing there’s a wet sound too.”

“All right. Don’t move him..” They repeat and stress each syllable, their voice clear and strong, “Again, don’t move him to get to the wound. He may have a back or neck injury. Just make sure you and he are safe and that nothing will fall on him. If the wound is reachable, try to put pressure on it with cloth. Stay on the line. I will give you more instructions.”

“Okay,” I feel the breathing kicking in as I calm down. “I’ll get a blanket,” I say into the phone, as I put it down and grab some off the bed. I pile it around Grandpa’s side. It stains red, sopping up the blood. I feel the wetness in my socks. My socks! I need boots!

There’s one more crash and Nux flits around the corner. He motions for me to talk to him.

“Okay, I took care of the blankets, but I’m going to leave you here.” I say into the receiver “I’m relatively calm. So, I don’t need the support right now. I just need to have both of my hands to deal with the falling stuff. I think that

they chopped into some shelves or something,” I put the phone on the floor and hear an alarmed “chopped?” from the phone before I walk away.

I hiss at him, “What the hell was that? The operator thought there was someone here!”

He stares into my eyes. “You need to have a good story. They can’t question things. I’m just making a scene to match the story.”

“Well stop! There’s enough done,” I hiss.

“Fine, fine. Good job on the phone,” He says, “We’re good to go now. Just grab your bag and stuff you need. Also, the sword will be useful. So, take that too.”

“Why the fuck?” I ask.

Nux gives me a piercing glare. “I still need to save my village, and I don’t know what will happen to them if you get stuck here.”

“My grandfather might be dying!” I say, louder than I should.

“My whole family might be killed.” His high-pitched voice rings through the air.

“Fuck you. I’m done!” I scream.

The little pixie’s face screws up in anger. He flits close to my face, and draws his blade, “No you’re not. I will do whatever I need to take care of my family. That’s it. If your grandfather is the one keeping you here, then I’ll kill him and remove the issue. Hell, I could just sell you to the elves and leave.”

My body heats up, and I can feel my face tensing into a grimace. I can't fight. I'm just fucked. I need a way out, time to think of a plan. "Fine." I grab the sword from Grandpa's hand and the floppy leather sheathe from the ground and head over to my room, my mind racing, trying to come up with a lie. What the hell could I say to Nux? Nothing. Nothing will work. Who else could I talk to? Agot? Not now. The Morse would take too long. Also, I have no clue how to broach it with them. This shit is just fucking my life. I hear a faint voice, as I pass by grandpa. My feet feel cold and naked. I need help. I need something. My phone. The operator! I pick it up as I head to my room.

"Hello, are you there?" they ask. "I heard you and another person screaming.

"I'm back. One second." I head into the room, looking behind me. Nux seems to have flitted off. "There's somebody here." I think about what to say. How can I get it right? What lie? What part of the truth? "He's dressed in some medieval clothes. He has a sword. He said he'll kill my grandpa if I don't go with him on his quest. I don't know how to get out of this. My name is Patricia Daniels. He told me to get my backpack. I'm out of sight. I only have a few seconds."

"Patricia," they say, snapping me back to attention, "do you have a tracker app like find my phone?"

"Yes," Good, that'll give me options. Wait, No. I can't have them seeing the portal. I can't do it.

Turn it on and give me the information to access it. See if you can hide your phone somewhere in your clothes. We'll use it to find you. Help is on the way. It may take a while. So, stall for as long as you can. Try to get away if you can."

"I will, but I can't say it," I lie. There's no reception in the other world anyway. I continue "Is there a way I can text you the tracker info?"

"Send it to this number," a text shows up in my phone.

"Thank you. I'll send as soon as I can. I don't know when that'll be, but I'll do it when he can't see me. I have to get back."

"Good. Just try to get away as soon as possible," they say. "Struggle, but don't risk getting injured. Mute your phone but keep me on the line."

"My phone's almost dead," I lie again. No. I can't use this. I'm all on my own.

"Then, hang up and give me that info as soon as possible," the operator orders.

"Thank you, goodbye," I say and hang up.

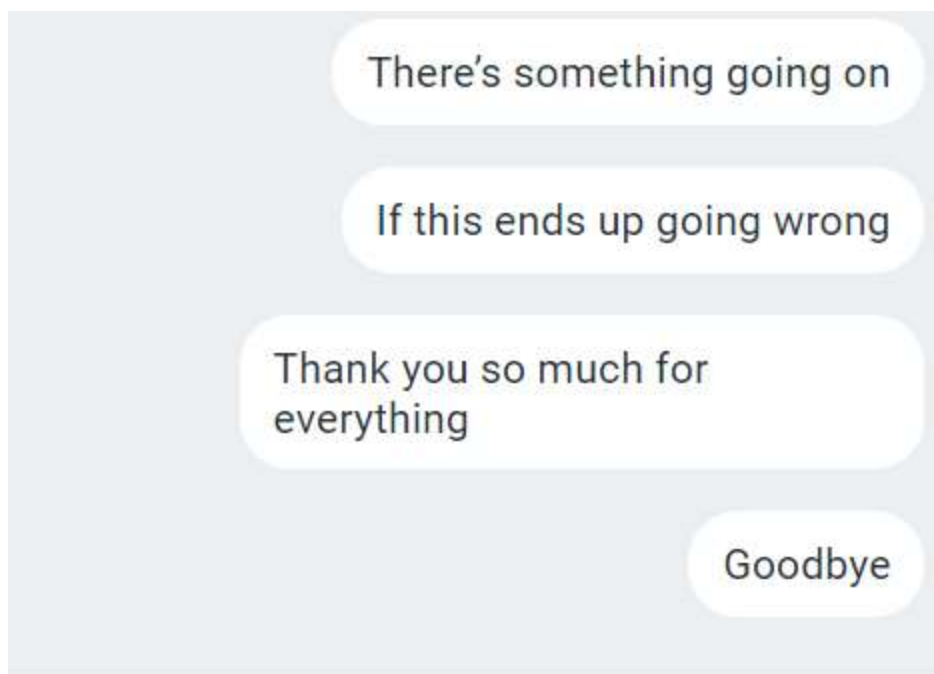
I look down at my phone. No more help here. Just me. I take in one big breath and let it out.

I turn around. There, on my bed is a pair of boots, new, un-scuffed, dark brown, heavy canvas, combat boots. There's a little note on the lacings. I pick it up and read it.

“Your parents told me you like your boots, but when you’re ready, the VA’s office said these would be a good replacement. Titanium toes! -Grandpa”

I can hear that last comment, Grandpa saying it just like his “loose-leaf tea.” I press my thumb on the end. It’s hard. I feel wetness in my eyes and turn back to the door. Fuck.

I change my socks, shove my feet in the new boots, and lace them up. There’s a comforting weight to these but more space. I’ll have to get used to these. I breathe. In, out. Back to the moment. I wipe away the tears. I text Firio, ignoring his other messages.



I grab my backpack, shove a bunch of clothes in, and walk back to the living room, carrying my backpack. I take one last look into the door at Grandpa, breathing lightly. He might die, I realize. Like Grandma, he might just

die. This might be the last moment I see him alive. The world blurs as my eyes heat up again. I breathe. In, out.

“You ready?” Nux asks.

“Yes,” I lie and wipe away my tears.

“Let’s go then,” He orders. “Can’t do anything for your grandpa on our own, and I don’t want to be around for whoever you called to get here.”

“Fine,” I say, and we leave.

The steps to and through the portal are quick, and I don’t think about what just happened. Just focus on the here and now.

I feel different now. My body shakes, and the world passes by as I feel tiny hands pulling my own, guiding me. I don’t feel like I’m walking. Instead, I catch myself from falling over by stepping forward, over and over. Time passes, and my thoughts loop. My body aches, I don’t know if it’s from injury or concern. Instead, I just let whatever has my hand drag me forward.

I feel it stop and I look up.

I’m back at the edge of the ruins. It’s dark this time. Nux is holding my hand. I look around, like this place is new. He looks at me. I look back at him, and he glides down to the ground. I drop my bag and just let myself go down. I feel the piled-up grass and leaves through my clothes, and I just close my eyes.

Chapter 14

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I sneeze myself awake. Ugh. I sit up. My back and sides hurt. I shift and grass something tickles my nose I open my eyes. I'm surrounded by piles of dead plant stuff on top of hard gray stone. A bright blue circle illuminates the floor next to me. I look up. There's a roof, made from that weave of noodly stone. Looks safe enough. Ugh, I feel the bruises forming from the hard floor. The grass and leaves don't give much cushioning. Whatever. I sit up and notice that I'm by where we dropped off the mushrooms, but they're not there. My bag is right next to me. I take out my water bottle and shake it. Empty. Of course. Well, let's hope the river isn't infected by magical worms that'll eat me from the inside out. I stand up, still fully clothed. I probably smell. Maybe taking a bath wouldn't be the worst either, wash off this grime. I check my bag. Probably another change of clothes in here. Yeah, let's take a bath. My feet feel weird.

Then, yesterday comes back to me. The ghost, Grandpa, Greg, my old boots! Fuck my life. I- I can't do this. I just walk.

I round the corner and notice another little nook, there's a small pack and similar bedding to mine. I look down at Nux's stuff. There's not much, but I

notice some tiny books and a blanket covering something in the corner. I lift it up.

It's a gun.

It's a gun!

IT'S A GUN!

Tommy stands in front of me, his expensive sweater-jacket open, as he pulls out a gun from a leather under-arm holster.

"This is what dick-envying trannies deserve," he says.

I stand between the gun and my bandmate.

"You're fucking done!" something burns through my veins. I feel my body's strength, each muscle gripping hard to the trunk. I see red. I launch myself to his branch. The invisible organ opens, wide. I keep channeling the agility and add the ghost Talent, passing through a branch. I land on top and lunge at him. "I'm not letting you do any of this shit anymore! If you want to kill him, then get through me."

Tommy's face makes an O of surprise as I kick his side. There are two loud cracks, as something breaks against the steel-toed boots. The gun goes off.

I kick away the gun and grab his hair, pulling his doubled-over face up to mine.

"I'll kill you," I stare into his eyes.

Tommy's bright blue eyes look scared. I push him away and launch another kick, this one into his chest, knocking him down.

I scream, "You're why he almost killed himself!"

Fuck.

I'm on my hands and knees, just now coming back to the world. I need to go. I pull myself back up and run away.

I'm dragged away from a barely recognizable mass of meat and broken bone. The polished tile squeaks against my boots. I stop struggling. My brain clears, and I see the stares. I fucked up. I look up to the person dragging me away, Firio. There are tears in his eyes. I see the case for his bass as I slide past. There's a bullet hole in it.

Eventually, the sound of running water reaches my ears, guiding me closer, back out of my mind.

Focus on something else! Like, what the hell is with the ghosts.

"It hurts," is all Tommy can say as I get on top of him and grab his hair.

No, I shake my head. I can't just let myself go about this wrong. Breathe. Keep to the here and now. In, out. In, out. In, out. The wet smell of plants barges into my sinuses.

Keep with the ghosts. Nux said they're just tame little things. Also, rare, but I saw three, and one tried to kill Grandpa and me. The hell do I do about that.

I feel his blood on my fingers.

Stay to the present! Breathe. In, out. I reach the edge of the river, a strip of moving water in a ditch, surrounded by a row of prickly plants. I take the sword out of the sheath strapped to my bag and slash at the bushes, treating the precious blade like a cheap machete. I'll apologize later. I don't need to worry about this. I sit down and just breathe.

Just breathe.

Just breathe.

I don't know how long I sit there breathing. I don't even count my breaths. I just live in the rhythm of it. In, out. In, out. In, out.

"I need to figure out what to do about the ghosts," I say to myself out loud. Maybe Agot'll know something. But the elves will kidnap me, then. I'll be missing, and grandpa will...

I sigh. He didn't deserve any of this shit. He had a shit son, a shit granddaughter, got attacked by a ghost. Fuck, he's too old for this. I stare down at my boots, my brand-new boots he just got for me. I barley know the fucking guy and I treated him like shit. Fuck! He deserves better. I feel my eyes get hot.

Breathe! In, out. You can deal with this later. I crouch down by the edge of the water and scrape away the plants I had cut. I feel a tear drip down my

cheek. I don't wipe it away. There's a nice little root creating a ledge of dirt and less thorny grass. The tear drips off my chin, making it itch. I shrug off my bag and sit down. I feel the small stones and dirt stick to my ass. I don't give a single fuck anymore. I look around. I'm not getting caught out without my boots again, without Gramp's boots. Nothing jumps out. I scan again, looking at every single thing in the area with suspicion. Nothing. I untie the knot on my boots. Again, look. Just green plants, brown rocks, and shimmering water.

I loosen the laces and shimmy my feet out. I'm back to just socks. I feel just as naked here as back at Grandpa's. I take another deep breath. In, out. I'm fine. I grab the sword, feeling the weight of the weapon in its scabbard. It's fine. I am fine. I take a breath. In, out. I peel off the socks. They're off. My feet are bare. I place them on the ground. I feel grass and mud and little pebbles. I don't remember the last time I felt that. I look at the socks. The normal white has black on the bottom, probably from the brand-new soles of the boots. Ugh. They feel moist. I set the socks aside and dangle my feet just past the grassy lip of the ditch. They hover a foot or so over the waterline, I feel like something will reach up and grab them, or a fish will jump and bite me. No. Stop projecting, Breathe! Ground yourself! In, out. In, out... In... out. The waterline is a foot from my feet. The side of the ledge has a bunch of overhanging roots. Something, something rain something river rising, something, erosion. Whatever. I strip off the rest of my clothes, double checking that there's been nothing happening

down there. Nope. No red. Convenient timing. Would suck to deal with tampons and pads now.

I set all my clothes on the other side, away from my bag and hopefully a full set of clean ones. Whatever. Worries for later.

I shift my way down to the edge of the ditch, right where I feel like I'm going to slip off. I take my hair out of its tiny ponytail. Yeah, too short for the good long hair styles. Too long to not have to deal with. Maybe I should shave it again. Nah. Not dealing with the screaming match, judgement, and blaming again. I sit myself on that edge and dip my feet down into the water. I jerk them out at the sudden coldness. It's colder than it should be. Shit. My feet feel so sensitive. In, out. Okay, just dunk and stay. I splash my feet straight into the water. It sears cold, soft skin suddenly turns hard and tingly. Still, it feels oddly nice; it's something new. I feel the skin on my shoulders and cheeks burn, doubtlessly from sunburns. Fuck. Why do people suck without sunscreen? Wonder what happened to people before that stuff was invented. Probably just dealt with it. Forests and caves are probably good shady places.

I shove myself into the cold water and feel my entire body tighten up. I gulp air like a fish. In, out in, out in. out! The water presses against me like a crowd, shoving me with the flow. Like trying to get out of the metro just as rush hour starts.

Heard that it helps if you dunk your head in. So, I do. And now my hair is in my face. I blindly grab at the edges of the river, pulling dirt and thin roots as

I search for something stronger. In, out. Something about the width of the pavilion pole at school hits my hand and I instinctually grab. I lift my head and chest out of the water and breathe. Good. In, out Good. In, out. Just fine.

I was a pretty strong swimmer, but still. Ahh, fuck. Dying probably wouldn't be that bad, considering the state of my life. Let's get back in.

I slide back in, keeping hold of the branch and sweep the hair out of my face. I go horizontal, letting the force of the water keep me up. Yeah, this'll be good. The grime of the water washes off of me as my body acclimates to the not quite freezing river current. Well, suppose what the internet says about cold showers is true.

Still, fuck them. Fuck everyone. Fuck, fuck, fuck. I say it aloud. "Fuck all y'all." It rolls off my tongue in a satisfying way. Yeah. I'm done helping everyone. Let's just be selfish now. Just get to know what's going on with Grandpa, have a little fun and get outta here. Not worth it. I try looking up, but the water prevents it. Nope. Not going back yet.

After a while. I start shivering. Yeah, getting on with my life is a pretty good idea. I shift around, holding the root of a pretty gnarly tree. "*A pretty gnarly tree.*" Song title note. Fuck. Don't have my phone. Well, fuck. The branches and leaves corkscrew up, making little beams of light that filter down to wholes of exposed black wood. Fuck, I wish I had a camera. That looks so cool. I'll remember you, tree.

I suppose now would be a good time to get out anyway. I climb back up to the nook of roots I found before, out of the water, and staying away from the dirtier parts this time. I look up and see if there's a way to get over the ridge and onto the ground. Yeah, there's a divot where a bunch of roots overhang. I grab one of the roots above me and pull. It comes down, not holding my weight enough. I sigh. Okay, I'll have to go around. I look down at the freezing water and shiver even harder. Oh, I reach into the invisible organ and pull from the lightness Talent. The roots I'm on swing up a little, and I hold on tight with my arms as they adjust. The divot is closer now, and I reach up to grab the root. It holds stronger, and I pull myself up and over the ridge. Yeah, these things are really useful.

I stand up and slap off as much mud and many leaves as I can. I wipe myself relatively dry, sliding the water and little bits of dirt off my body with my hands and rush over to my stuff. I step on a root and it feels so hard on my feet. The leaves and grass poking out of it is much kinder. I bound between the roots and tall reeds and over to my stuff. It's still there perfectly fine. I unzip the bag and grab some clothes, assembling a full outfit, sports bra, panties, black, baggy, cargo pants with an inbuilt belt, mismatched socks, and a Megadeath band shirt. I put on my underwear and pants first, then the socks. I need the boots. I shove my foot in, and it's much easier to put these ones on. I pull on the other boot. Okay, I'm good now. I grab the shirt and pull it over my head, tucking it into the belt and tightening it. Then, I lace up the boots. The tightness

is comforting, locking my feet in. Okay, I'm good. Wait. No, I'm forgetting something. Oh! I pull out my phone from the bag and open my note app "A *pretty gnarly tree, Corkscrew branches hold beams of sun, lancing them into its own dark wood.*" I'll figure it out later, but still, I remembered you tree. I smile.

Okay, back to everything else. Let's talk to Agot about all this mess. I put my phone into my pocket and take the telegraph out of my bag. My hair soaks the back of my collar as I tap out a message to Agot.

.- . / - . . -.. / - --- / - . -.. -.- WE NEED TO TALK

The river babbles line up and form a Morse beat.

.... .-.. -.. --- / .- .-. / -.- --- ..- / - .- -.. .. -. --- / -- . / ..- .-. / --- -. / -- -.- / --
- ..- ..- .-. HELLO ARE YOU TAKING ME UP ON MY OFFER They reply. The whole message takes almost a minute to finish.

I tap back

-- .- -.- -... . MAYBE

I sit down in the sun, just letting everything dry off.

Eventually, I hear that ambiguous voice again. "Hello, what do you need?" they ask.

I jump up and grab the sword. They stand a good distance away, in the field of grass, away from the river. "First, are you going to kidnap me as a "Talent Slave?"

They look into my eyes; sharp lips turn to a grimace and brows furrow in a serious expression. "No. Who said that?"

I breathe a sigh of relief. Okay, I'm fine. Should I tell them about Nux? Fuck it, why not? "That pixie I've been with has said that elves captured his village."

"I have not, nor have any of the members of my trading company ever done any of that. We are explorers and businesspeople," they say, "We will never ruin our reputations by taking advantage of others like that." They sigh, "Now, that pixie, I will tell you this for free, is not a person to be trusted."

I let out a breath. The intensity of their words released. "O-okay," breathe, In, out. Put down the sword, "Yeah, I've already made that mistake."

"Unfortunate," they reply, "Let us get to business though. I will not be taking advantage of you, no matter what *he* says."

"Yeah," I smile, "Good." I feel oddly safe here. Agot seems okay, one track mind, though.

They walk closer, "You've been contacting me from a long distance away. I'd like to know what it is, and possibly trade for it, if it is available," they say, now within arm's reach, "For this information, I'd be willing to answer any questions you may have about your current situation and the area, in general."

Oh, an exchange. I suppose it's fair. I need another source of info, away from Nux, anyway. "Sure," I lean down and pull the telegraph out of my backpack. "This is it. I tap out various patterns that correspond to letters, and that does whatever it does on your end."

"Fascinating," they say.

“It’s not up for trade,” I say.

“Ahh, that is fair. It seems to be a very complex Talent engine,” they note.

“Is this a unique item?”

“Yes, it was my grandmother’s,” I say, looking down. I trace my thumb around the knob.”

“Still, it is a wonderful piece. I’d like to ask to open the opportunity for further trade in the future, and in return, I can bring you to the encampment to show what I can offer,” they say.

Woah, that’s a lot. Keep focused, this will get you more time to talk, and maybe an out, if you need to get away from Nux. “Okay, but I have my questions.”

“Well then, let’s walk while we talk.” They nod, “We’re a little way away from the camp, but it shouldn’t take too long to get there.”

Finally, I need to know. “Are ghosts a thing?”

They raise an eyebrow as I walk next to them. “Yes, I suppose, though they’re very rare. I’ve never seen one in person.”

“Well,” I take a breath accentuating the rhythm of my footsteps. “one broke into my house, attacked my grandfather, and said something about my grandmother.”

They look at me with a strange expression, a mix between bewilderment and intrigue. “That doesn’t make any sense to me. Ghosts are usually directionless and just attack whatever living thing gets too close. They’re usually

moaning about something, though. Maybe something strange going on, but if you find more, I would like to know.” They walk ahead, guiding me away from the river, into a thicker section of forest.

“Okay,” I say. “Who are you? Why are you out here?”

“Well, as I said earlier. I’m a trader and explorer.” Agot turns around, walking backwards. “And I’m heading a search expedition to see if there are any prospects here for trade, salvage, or any other business.” They gesture to me. “I suppose in one way, I’ve found you as part of that.”

“Why? What makes me special?” I ask.

“Well, humans are rare, and complex Talents, frequently fetch a premium,” they say, turning back around to step over a giant root.

I clamber over, falling behind the brisk pace. They pause, waiting for me to catch up; I jog a little through the thickening brush.

“That makes sense,” I say. “Though, that sounds like there’s some big city somewhere to do business.”

“There is. Right now, we’re in relatively unexplored territory,” they say, gesturing around. “And my group is one of very few that the council has decided to allow to explore outside the Valley’s surrounding area,” Agot smiles and knocks on a trunk of a tree, “We’re here.”

I look around, but there’s nothing except a bunch of thick trees around. It looks darker around here than most of the other places. Only little rays of light actually reach the ground. There’s a little mound of dirt I can see through the

forest. Then, a rope ladder drops, and I look up. It seems like a perfectly normal thick canopy, excepting the knotted rope extending down to me. Agot grins and clambers up. I do the same, and the ropes push away from me. I pull my legs together, keeping from doing the splits. All right, Let's do this. I jump on, pulling myself onto the ladder. I start swinging, my legs swing out from under me. I have to latch on with my arms. Shit. Okay, remember, rope, keep close to it. I pull my body into the ladder and stabilize. Next, boot on rung. I reach and reach but keep missing. I look through and finally see the rope rung over my boot. I move it around and on top. I make my way up like this. Move arms, pull close, look at boot, stand on rope. I get up twenty rungs like this. Then, I see I'm in the first layer of the canopy and look around and up. There are bunch of cloth triangles made between pairs of thick branches, extending between branches right above platforms made from wicker-like sticks. There's a platform right above me, and the ladder I'm on is tied to a thick branch extending above that platform. I pull myself up another seventeen rungs come to the level of one of the platforms. Agot finishes talking to another elf and pats them on the back of their long neck. The other elf is turned away, dressed in a flowing green-gray patterned cloth tied off at the neck, elbows, and knees. It looks kind of like a jumpsuit crossed with a robe. The skin I can see looks stretched tight over wirey muscles. The other elf's hair is brown and tied off into a long braid. As I step off the ladder and onto the platform, they lope away, bounding across one of the

bridges like an antelope. The woven sticks creak and bend a little below my boot.

Agot meets my eyes and smiles, gesturing to all of this. “Here is my primary encampment. My traders and I would love to form a long-term association with you and any partners of yours, I have my assistant preparing a tent for us to further discuss our business.”

The wicker platform is skinny without any handrail, but there is a thick rope tied around the tree. I latch my arm onto it. I can’t resist the temptation to look down to the ground far below. It seems much farther to the ground than I thought. Look back up. Nope, stay to eye level. Breathe, feel the rhythm, don’t let the fear stop you. In, out. In, out. Keep your eyes up.

Elves walk all around, traveling between V-shaped bridges made only from rope, from platform-to platform, many of them have tents suspended over them.

“Wow,” I say.

“I’m glad to see you impressed,” Agot says, “I think you may enjoy what we have to offer. Come, the tent should be ready for us. We can continue with the questions and I can show you our wares.”

They bring me around to the other side of the tree and walk across one of those rope bridges. Oh, great. Let’s just do it.

I take my time. Look at the rope and boots, not the ground. Keep to the rhythm of your breaths. Just add footsteps to that. I place each step on the

bouncy rope bridge, holding both sides for dear life. One boot, the other boot, just keep going. I'll be fine. Eventually, I get to the other side.

“Apologies for that, I forgot that humans tend to wear foot coverings that make it difficult to cross. I will do my best to make it easier in the future,” Agot says.

“Thank you,” I look up at them. My face burns with the blood flow. Okay, calming down, let the adrenaline pass.

“For now, I can promise that the tent will be easy,” They say.

“Good, I'm glad.”

I look up. This tent is a dark green on the bottom, but the top is decorated with a bright purple and yellow pattern. Agot reaches over to one of the branches holding the tent up, places their foot on a carved divot in the tree, and swings over, around, and into the tent. Okay now, they're just showing off. I place my foot in a lower indentation, grab the one higher up and hoist myself in reach of the branch, before hauling myself over, and into the tent. I get up on my hands and knees onto a hard, woven branch floor. I look down and it seems like it's similar to the whicker below, but the bark is stripped off and the wood underneath is stained dark.

I look up to see Agot sitting cross-legged against the trunk of the tree. The tent has a triangular shape, with the point being cut off into the tree and outermost edge rounded off. There's a squat, round table and a curved board placed opposite to Agot's position. There are a pair of small black curtains set

next to Agot, halfway up their middle arms, with some pieces of cloth poking out over the tops.

They smile and gesture to the board, some kind of chair, I think? I take off my backpack and put down sideways, sword handle facing me, just in case. I cross my legs and lean my back against the plank, then look at Agot.

“Okay, so what is this?” I ask.

“This, Pat, is one of the trading tents. I would like to show you some of what my company has to offer, to see if you feel that a trading relationship would be mutually beneficial,” they gesture to the curtains, “Overwhelming people doesn’t tend to go well. So, these curtains are here to help me prevent that. I will present goods you may enjoy, and we will barter about what you will offer in exchange.”

“Okay, but I don’t have anything to offer right now, and I’m dealing with the ghost issue at the moment,” I say.

“Ahh,” Agot says, “While that is unfortunate, we can also set aside items you would want for the future and make that exchange later. Now, I was going to save this for later in the presentation, but I think this may be important for you.”

Agot reaches behind one of the curtains and pulls out a small, long necked bottle with a wax stopper, filled nearly to the brim with a white milky substance.

“This is a Talent that will allow the person using it to heal much faster and more efficiently than normal. It has even allowed for lost limbs to be regrown. You mentioned that your grandfather was attacked. This will help with his injuries,” they say.

Those words hit me like a truck. I feel my mouth drop open, literally, just open. Fuck! I thought he was going to die. Fuck, I need to trade something!

“What do you want for it?” I ask.

Agot nods, probably hearing the desperation in my voice, “There are a lot of things you could possibly offer. However, I suppose what I am most interested in is Complex Talents. We would provide the talents to combine and you would mix them,” they say. “If I were to come back to the Valley with connections to a human, a reliable source of combinations, that may justify more expeditions to the council. However, that would require more than just a few, to show that we are not just scavenging from ruins.” They meet my eyes, “Five Talent combinations for a bottle.”

Those words hit me like a truck. “I - I don’t know how to do that.”

Their face falls. “Oh. That is unfortunate. I’m sorry.”

An idea hits me. Nux! He mentioned manuscripts! Maybe he could teach me.. “I can learn. I think there’s a way I can learn. I need to go!” I get up, grabbing the backpack and crawling out of the tent.

“Oh,” Agot says, “I suppose that we will complete this later.”

I don’t even turn back as I yell “Yeah!”

“Okay, please do come back. We will be here and willing to trade, neutral of whatever is happening with Nuxinor and his family.”

“There’s no village?” I turn back to face them.

“Correct, there’s no known Pixie village around here.

Fuck, he’s one hell of a liar. I feel the anger rising in me. Ugh, I’m just so done with all of this shit. Now, I have to go back to him. Fuck.

“Hey, are you doing okay?” Agot asks. The change in tone breaks through my thoughts.

“Uh-“ I look up and onto their eyes, I can see genuine concern. Fuck. Okay “Yeah. I - I just am overwhelmed. There’s a lot going on. I need that Talent.” Nux is lying to me. I don’t even know what’s going on with him. I have to go back and manage him. Otherwise he’ll attack Grandpa or me, or he’ll go through the portal and go after everyone.

“Take your time.” Agot says, “Apologies if I overwhelmed you. However, if there’s anything I can help you with, please let me do so.”

My head is going so many directions. Breathe. In, out. In, out. Okay, everything’s gone crazy. Nux and Agot and the ghosts. Fuck. In, out. Just, figure out Nux. Wait!

“Nuxinor,” I make sure to use the formal name, “said he’s going to attack the elves that captured his village. I don’t know if he means you or another group, but it may be something you need to worry about.”

Agot looks unfazed, “Thank you for this information. I believe we will be fine. However, it serves to be prepared. I will let the guard know. Before you go, though, do you have any last questions.”

I know what I need to do. What else is there. Dealing with the threat. “Yeah,” I say “What’s the pixie family’s deal? You mentioned you knew something about them?”

“Yes, they were part of a larger city to the west, one of the trading partners of mine. They say that there was a family that collected old artifacts and knowledge from when humans last came. However, there was an,” They take a breath, “Incident that ended with the execution of Nux’s parents and banishment of the rest of the family. It’s unfortunate. They were good business partners.”

“All right, thank you for the information. I’ll be back.” I say and step out of the tent, onto one of the footholds outside.

Agot calls out, “I appreciated meeting you. I hope your situation will be resolved. Feel free to contact me with that method again.”

“Yeah, I’ll head out. I know the way, I think.”

I climb down with the foot and handholds and look across to the rope bridge where the ladder is. Nope. That’ll take too long. Grandpa might not have the time. I look down. That’s pretty far, but maybe.

I start burning the lightness Talent. I feel the whicker platform press against my boots much less. The backpack feels much bulkier, though. I swing it fully onto my back. It seems heavier. Yeah, okay. Let's do this.

I jump off the edge. The fall only takes a second before I land. I fall over and accidentally throw myself forward. My body scrapes along the ground, but I'm fine. I stand up.

Woah, okay, that's what lightness does. Okay! Let's do this. I stop the Talent, the invisible organ pinching off the flow inside me, and run out of the encampment and back over to the river. Okay, what will I do? I have no clue right now. In, out. Go back to Nux. In, out. I can't let him know where the elves are or that I've been here. And he has access back to the real world. He might be the one behind the ghosts. Little lie, little truth. I was just washing myself and dealing with grandpa dying. He's not going to die, though, as long as I can learn how to do the combinations.

I tromp back to the ruins. The little shelter Nux set up is a little way in, actually, not far from the portal. I hope that's not intentional. There's a little smoke by it. I come around the corner of one of the piles of rubble. It's so strange that this structure is almost completely demolished. There's just not much left. There's a fire, and Nux is sitting next to it, a couple of kabab-esque things hang over the flames. I don't say anything as I sit down next to him.

“We’re going to grab the rest of the Talents from the village. The elders might just have some information on humans. Since Talents are so new to you, it’s likely there’s something that may help you in the histories,” Nux says.

“Okay.”

“Have you figured out how to make complex Talents?” He asks

“No.”

The pixie shrugs, “The foods about ready. Eat up.”

Chapter 15

.---- -.-.- / .. /- .. -.. / .. / ---.. / -- / .- -. -.. / / .-- ---- ..- .-.. -.. /
 -... /- -.. / --.-.-.-.- / / ..- -. -.. .-.. -.. - ---- ---- -.. -.-.- /- /- ...
 -... .- -. -.. /- -.. / -.. .. -.. / ..- .. -.. -.. -.-.-

After breakfast, Nux has me take the glowing talent he got from mashing the mushrooms and put in in the box. Then, we tromp back through the forest, Nux spreading his wings every few minutes and pointing us further in. I think I'm much quieter this time, the leaves don't crunch as loud, as I place each foot amongst them. Though, I notice that we're headed away from the encampment Agot brought me to earlier.

"All right, you're close enough. Connect that talking thing to me and I'll grab the info and any remaining Talents we need. Hope the elders aren't dead."

I take out the telegraph and tap out the pangram.

... .-.. -.-.-.- / ---- ..- / -... ..- .- -.-.-.- / -.-.- ..- .- .- - ---- / .---- ..- -.. -.-. / -- -.-
 / ...- ---- .- SPHINX OF BLACK QUARTZ JUDGE MY VOW

"Say something"

"Something," He replies.

A gust of wind starts blowing, swishing the trees, and I tromp around, letting the rhythms of the Morse manipulate my footsteps, I stumble a couple times, but the word taps out quicker.

“You’re good, but make sure you keep it short. The Morse is slow, and I won’t be able to react too quick.”

He thumbs up at me then runs into the underbrush, barely making any sound, as he disappears into the leaves of bushes and fallen branches.

“Welp, he’s gone now.”

Nux’s little form comes back, hand held out. “Box”

I hand him the wooden box. He holds it like a giant crate in front of him, then heads back into the underbrush, considerably louder and slower than before.

This’ll take a while. I look around at the various trees and shrubs. Wow just filled completely. Forests. Fine then, I’ll sit on one of you. I choose the least-thorny looking bush and dump my bag on top of it. The thing compresses like a sofa cushion. Then, I sit on the bag. Yeah. This’ll do for now.

After about twenty minutes, I finally hear the rhythms

.... . -.- / .-. .-. .-. ... / .. -- /-. . HEY POPS IM HERE

There’s a pause, then.

.. - ... / -. .-. .-. -. / - .-. / / -. .-. .-. -. / - .-. .-. ITS GOOD TO SEE YOU

TOO

All right, not too interesting. I’ll just keep listening in occasionally.

/ .. .-. .-. / .-. .-. .. - . / -. .-. .-. -. / .. / -. .-. .-. / - .-. / -. .-. .-. / - -. .-. ... /
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 KEEP THINGS CLEAR FOR MY FRIEND PAT

kept us all together until my turn to go ham on the drums, adding in all these forms of percussion that didn't belong anywhere our metal. We were fucking awesome and actually got people in and listening. Fuck, I miss those days. They weren't so long ago, I suppose.

I come back to the moment. The trees stopped swishing, giving me any Morse. Nux's probably coming back. I just hope that Agot can handle whatever he has in store for them. I just need to learn, then run.

I hear the telltale clacking of Nux's wings in the underbrush, and I stand up, hauling the backpack back onto my shoulder.

We race back to Nux's camp, Talents and a scroll of some kind in tow.

When we get back, I ask Nux, "What is this thing?" holding up the scroll, tied in twine.

He looks out from inside his area of the ruins. "*That* is a great scroll passed down from generation to generation. It wields amazing power that allows one access to powers, previously untapped."

I cross my arms and wait for him to get to the point. What the hell is going on? Why is he all cheery and enthusiastic all of a sudden.

His theatrics don't stop. "It's the great scroll known as The Instructions!"

"Woo..." I jazz hands. Okay, go along with it, then get out.

“Buzzkill,” he sighs, “It’s what the elder found in his research about humans combining Talents. Some humans a hundred years back wrote a book or something about it, and she copied it. There, happy?”

I smile, biting back my anger. “That’s actually pretty cool. You should have led with it. Would have been better than your dumbass theatrics.”

“At least I try!” he says, putting his hands on his hips, “All you do is sit there, look pretty and complain.”

“Aww, you said I was pretty.” I bat my eyes at him. Fuck this guy.

He stares at me with an expression of annoyance.

I ignore him, untie the twine, and unfurl the scroll. The sheet is made of some weird-ass paper, rough and really thick, like some kind of handmade stuff artists use. I stare at the tiny brown ink marks on the page. Nothing. I can’t read a word. It’s all just a crap-ton of squiggles and loops, like some kind of fake cursive, not even that stuff grandparents use.

“Hey, what’s this?” I say flipping the scroll to him. Shit, I can’t just run with it.

“What?” He stares for a sec, “Oh, is it still too small? The elder tried to scale it up, but I didn’t think it was enough.”

“No, this isn’t writing.” I say.

“What do you mean?” he asks.

“This is a bunch of squiggles and loops,” I say, “no letters here at all.”

“What do you mean?” he says, “It’s plain human.”

I groan, “There’s way more than one human language, and I can barely read English cursive let alone this BS.”

“Fine. I’ll read it to you, then,” Nux sits down and stares at the sheet of paper.

I look at him.

“Well?” I ask

“Shush.”

“You’re supposed to be reading it out loud for me. I can’t read minds.” I say, crossing my arms. This is taking too long. I need to get the Talent and get back to Grandpa.

“Just give me a minute!” Nux says. He stares at the paper. “Okay, first off,” Nux glances at the paper again, “Yes - You need to channel two Talents.”

“What?!”

“What?” Nux asks, “Those are simple instructions and I said them in plain pixie, like we’ve been talking to me in.”

“No, wait I’ve been talking in pixie?” I start thinking to myself. Is that something with my human physiology here? No, probably some kind of Talent. “Never mind, let’s stay on track.” I’m just here to learn and trade for the healing Talent. I say to Nux “I understood your words, but how do I do that?”

“I don’t know, just go for it I guess,” he says

“All right, let’s try,” I say, “Only been doing this for a few days, though.”

I take a quick breath, then close my eyes and pull on that invisible organ, channeling the Talent Nux gave me when I first met him. The power flows out from my spine and along the whole nervous system. My body begins to feel lighter, the ground presses less on my boots. I hold that for a second, standing up and just there with the light body. Okay, got this. Now, let's just try the second right off the bat. I exchange my Talents, so I'm holding the weight reduction, glowing, and rapidity. Then, I stand up and shake my limbs around as the Talents settle into that organ.

I reach into the organ and pull on the glowing Talent from the mushrooms. I feel my body give off a radiance, something leaving me, like it's fighting against the sun. However, the ground moves back to press hard on my feet.

It's a transition, though. Not instant. I try to hold onto that transition, using both at a time. Come on!

And it's gone. Still, I had it for a second.

"Maybe I can do it," I say, looking at Nux.

He's lounging around in the same way I was a few minutes ago.

"Good! Let's get these combined and out of here," he says.

"Woah, I meant channeling two Talents, not combining. Nowhere near that yet! You haven't even told me how, just that I have to use two at once."

"Fine, fine. Just do whatever you need and tell me when you have two," he lays back down waving his hand dismissively... Ugh. He sounds like my

parents now. No, keep them out of here! Talents! Think about Talents. Two at a time.

I try again. Weight-reduction, hold, pull on light slowly. As I pull on the light the first Talent falls away, slower, but still. I have something, just a little, a half second more. Maybe I just have to get the feel of it, the rhythm of the two.

I sit down this time, my legs getting tired. Weight, hold, light, get both. Gone. Okay, progress. Slow, though. I just need the feel and focus.

Breathe. In, out; in, out. You have a plan. Breathe in, weight. Breathe out, hold. In, light. Out, and it releases. A little more then.

I ask Nux, "How long do I need to hold the two for?"

"Long enough to combine them."

"That doesn't help," I sigh, "Do the instructions say anything?" Fuck, I just need to learn this, and I can run. I just need to figure this out and how to get away.

He groans and picks the paper up. "Nope, just that you channel the two and smush together. It shouldn't be that hard. Just put it into different parts of your body."

"What?" I ask

He sits up, "What?"

"I channel to different parts of the body?" I ask.

"Yeah."

"Why didn't you say that in the first place!?" I yell.

“Thought it was obvious,” He says. “The basics of Talent channeling, do part then whole.”

“I never had to do that.” I throw up my hands, frustrated.

“Well aren’t you Talented, then.” Nux crosses his arms.

“Fuck you,” I say it with a grin on my face, but it feels real.

I breathe again. In, out; in, out. Okay, channel to part of the body. Legs. In, weight. Out, hold. Now the new stuff. I breathe in, my whole-body light with the Talent, then try to pull it back, lessen the amount of Talent I’m pulling on. It pulls away from my extremities, into my core. Yeah. Good. In, out; hold that way. I notice some leaking out to my limbs still. Whatever, leaky but working. In, out; hold. Now to push it down. In, I feel the lightness in my body, my abdomen and chest. Out, I push on it, shove it downwards, like a huge shit, forcing the energy out of my body, but not out my ass, instead into my legs. It moves down, not all the way but still, progress. Yes!

It goes out.

Shit.

Still, got something good out of it. With some more practice, I could do it.

“Come on,” Nux’s voice rings out, “I need these Talents before my whole village is completely murdered!”

Yeah, peace and calm. Completely fucked. This lying shit. I’m done with this. At least lie about the anger.

“Fuck you, you dumbass little shit,” my eyes jerk open, and face tightens into a scowl, “I’ve been doing this the best that I can, and you are not getting any better! Much more of this, and I’m fucking out!” I stand up and look down at his surprised face. No, fuck this, I’m done. “And if you come after me or my grandpa with your ghosts and shit, like you’ve been threatening, I will punt you right now so hard that you won’t have a single bone unbroken. You are an abusive, manipulative little shit, and I should just leave you right now, but no. I’m not doing this for you but for everyone else at your little village, if it’s even real. Maybe it’s just you living with your parents in the middle of the woods! I don’t know what kind of stunt you’re pulling, but I need to learn this shit. I’m trying to save my grandfather, and you’re being the most unhelpful teacher I’ve ever had. That’s a high bar to clear!”

My rage burns. My teeth and fists clench. The floodgates of the invisible organ open. Ready to channel and strike. Control it. I breathe in and out. I turn away from him. Fuck him! I’m done with this! Channel the light producing Talent. In. Hold. Out, I shove it down into my legs. In, hold. Out, use the rapidity Talent from the elders. In, shove up. Out, hold. In, hold. Out, release the separations. I feel the liquid power in my body swirling, mixing, and dripping out of me. I hold my hands in fists, squeezing out that new Talent into my palms. It feels solid and liquid at the same time, like wet soap. I hold it in my palm. It doesn’t absorb into my body. I check the invisible organ. There’s still a bunch of each

Talent inside. Okay, fine. Seems like three is a hard limit. Let's swap them, make him happy and he'll go away.

Nux stands in front of me. His sword is drawn and pointed at me.

"Finish the Talent," He says.

I turn away from Nux. Control. Breathe. In, out. In, out. Just reach into the box and pull the sound, swap out the weight-reduction. Now, breathe. In, out. Let's do this slow. Okay. What's the next step? Make that Talent. What do I need? I already have the light part. Now add the sound. Add that third Talent. Same process. Plug and play.

I take the new Talent back in, pulling it back through my palms. Okay. In, channel. Out, hold. Behind my eyelids, the world flashes over and over. I take another breath, just holding. In out. Next step. In shove low. Out, hold. The flashing continues. In, channel sound. A low hum begins. Block it out. Nothing matters but what's inside. Out, hold. The hum gets louder. In, shove up. Out, hold. Release.

The liquid sound power plops onto the solid flashing and seeps back into the invisible organ. The two pieces stay separate. What? I stop channeling. Okay, what's going on here? That's weird. I feel them out in the organ. The flashing feels more solid, like one whole piece. The liquid talent flows around that. Maybe I'm not good enough at this to combine a complex talent with anything. That kinda makes sense. Okay. Let's work around this. Channel three

talents to make the one at once? I breathe in and out and wiggle out my shoulders. I already got two; it's worth a shot. I grin. Let's go for it!

I don't even need to do the breathing pattern; channeling straight up and down is much easier now. Up, down. I reach into the invisible organ and tug on the third Talent.

Ba-thump.

The invisible organ seizes. My entire body lances with pain, a searing fire mixed with icy chills, then, a sudden shock. I fall to the ground.

Chapter 16

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When I wake up, Nux is standing over my face saying something, I can't really hear. I start trying to comprehend the words.

"Worthless piece of trash! Not even able to do the one thing that humans are meant for." Nux continues, "These elves killed my parents and threw me out of the city. These evil beings are out there ready to be killed, but I guess that that doesn't matter at all, since you can't make this one thing you shitstain."

My eyes shoot open and I realize exactly what he's saying.

Adrenaline rushes through my veins, getting me back together, despite the pain. "What the hell!?!? You lie to me, hide the fact that you're banished from the city, threaten my life multiple times, and now this!" This is too fucking much. It's *been* too fucking much! I'm done.

I grab my bag and the box with all the Talents in it, then, bolt, just running in a direction, not even looking forward, just down at the ground, trying to keep my feet moving as fast as possible. I can't do this anymore. I have what I need. I need to leave!

"Pat!"

I look back to see Nux flying behind me.

“Get away, fuck you. I’m done.” I scream.

I stumble over a root I didn’t see but stabilize and keep moving.

“No, I need those Talents!” Nux yells behind me.

“Leave me alone!” I scream, not even looking back, I feel wetness in my eyes, “I will fucking kill you.” I’m worried I mean those words.

“No, you won’t,” the confidence in his voice is infuriating.”

I wheel around to face him and just stop. “You want to fucking bet you bitch ass faker.”

I can’t kick him with my boots. I reach for the side of the bag, where the sword is strapped into the cupholder and start channeling – My body seizes again, the invisible organ just lancing pain through my body. Fine.

I swipe at him with the sword, slashing left and right, but he dances around the blade. I’m not even getting close. Shit.

“Just give me the Talent and I’ll leave you alone. That’s it. You’re angry. I’ve got enough. I’ll leave you to it.”

Those words “you’re angry” resonate. In, out. I automatically start breathing. Just like I was taught in anger management. In, out. I need to get out of this situation. In, out. How? In, out. Give him what he wants. In, out.

I ignore the pain and just channel the two Talents, shoving one down the other, up. Mix. And let it leak from my body. After a couple moments, the Talents in my body run out. I feel the invisible organ convulse, dripping all the weighty

Complex Talents out from my body, out my eyes, my nose, tongue, ears, and fingers, the liquids like snot run from my body. They leave no residue as they plop on the ground like dead slugs.

“Fucking there, take it,” I say with a hoarse voice and run away.

Okay. Breathe. In, out. In out. What's up? Something seems to be attacking me. Not a good look at it but has hands. Pretty sure they went in. Injuries?

I check my face and body.

No, nothing. Okay, pushed it away with the power, must be light. Some kind of bird person thing? Sure. Take a peek up in the sky. Probably hunting me from there.

I look up and around the trunk. Something is floating there in the sky, slowly falling. Too big for a bird, person shaped. What the hell?

I turn back. In. Out. What could it be? It was shaped like a human. I couldn't make out much more than the outline. It was really high in the sky, confirming the lightness. But even then, the wind should have caught it and blown the thing away.

I take another peek. It's not there anymore. I glance across the ground. There's movement right below where it was. Something misty. I can kinda see through it. It flashes solid with a foot on the ground. I see it.

It's the same thing that attacked Grandpa. That ghost bitch. The same floppy summer hat, formal white dress, and wrinkled old face. It's that same scowl. That ghost tried to kill Grandpa. Fuck. That. Ghost. Bitch.

My entire body flares in rage. I pull the sword out of its sheathe. "Imma cut that hag into pieces, like she tried to do Grandpa," I say under my breath. Fuck her! Fuck Her! Fuck her!!!

In. Out. Calm down. Here and now. It's approaching. I don't know how to kill it. I have to run.

Bullshit!

That logical side of my mind falls away. Even those nagging little thoughts of responsibility and understanding is not going to pull me out of this. All it can do is keep me breathing.

In. Out. Yeah, fuck this bitch.

Instead, I think about how to wreck shit. Its hands vs boots and sword. The sword's longer, and my boots can break whatever I kick, but I'm not good at this yet. If something goes wrong, I can throw the ghost away with the pushing Talent. I was able to blind it, but I'm out of light. I have sound. Maybe that can do something? Let's not test.

My brain flashes through the ideas, both my anger and rationality, now pointed in the same direction, processing things fast.

Just kick and push. Just try it once. It should be close.

I dart around the side of the tree and run toward where that ghost was. It's in front of me still misty, floating toward me. I swing my foot up, into its face. It swings back, misty - see through fingers reach toward me. My boot passes through, throwing my balance off. I push with my Talent. It flies away then stops midair, becoming opaque. The thing drops from the air and hits the ground in a heap.

See through must mean pass through. Must be able to go intangible. I Stereotypical ghost. Opaque must mean solid. Don't know how that makes it stop. Still. Same idea. Just try to hit it when solid. I can't kick it, though. I almost fell over when I did. I grip the sword with both hands and raise it between the ghost and myself. Then, I rush forward. My mouth's open. There's a loud sound. I'm probably screaming.

The thing hunches up, its face looking up at me. I close the distance and swing. The hat comes off. Half the thing's face is leaking a white mist. It becomes transparent for a second, sinking into the ground, then opaque again and launches into the air, without even moving its legs. I swing up at it. It's out of reach.

Get out of here! My brain screams to me. I turn and pound the ground for a few steps.

I don't hear the thing thump on the ground. I look over my shoulder. It's transparent again, floating downward.

I stop, holding the sword between it and me. In, out. I need to see what's going on. Besides. I got it. I hit a swing. It should be dead though. The sword hit its head. Whatever. Ghost rules. In out. Still, it leaks gray mist from that cut. Seems like blood for this thing. Maybe it'll bleed out.

It opens its mouth.

"I killed him, but he's not there," the voice is so indistinct, like the transparency pervades everything for this being.

I don't reply. Save that for later. Just swing, push, and run.

It turns solid, lands on the ground, and screams. "He's not there!"

I ignore the wails. In, out. In, out. Just breathe. Keep ready. Swing, push, run, reset.

It launches at me, jumping forward, turning transparent, and floating toward me. Its hand stretches out at my face. I back up, stepping backward as it closes the distance. I hold the sword in both hands between me and it, ready to swing or stab the moment it lands. It floats in a lazy arc forward. I keep backing up. It starts falling, its outstretched fingers point toward me toward me. Its foot touches the ground, sinking into it. Then turns solid. I swing at its arm. It rockets into the air and toward me. I push. It flies away. I run.

In, out. I turn around and plant my feet again. The thing leaks from its arm now, gray mist forming a trail below it, raining down, becoming a small fog on the ground.

"Okay. Just keep doing this," I mutter, breathing heavy, "Just keep going."

The ghost falls to the ground in that heap again.

No. Not doing that again. It almost hit me last time. Just stay like this.

It turns transparent. I get ready. It sinks. "Agnes sent me to kill."

I stiffen up, my entire body, tensing. The words hit me hard. That's Grandma's name. What? She's -NO, not now! This thing tried to kill grandpa! It's not there must mean he's not dead. He's not a ghost!

The old lady is already close, I push it back, but it turns solid with the stump of its wrist in me. I feel a thump in my stomach, like I've been punched. I have the wind knocked from me. I lose that rhythm.. Then the pain hits, it feels hot, burning, fiery liquid leaking out from where it touched me, muscle exposed to the air. I double over, but that makes it hurt worse. Everything tenses. Shit! Shit! Shit!

Breathe in out-

I gulp in air, trying to get anything to work, I wave the sword in my hand around me. I can't see. My eyes are closed. I try to open them. Tears leak out, protecting against the bright sun as it shines in my face. I see the ghost rushing toward me.

Push! I force the energy through my body. It stops, not even flying back, the energy in my body constricts with the pain. Fuck! I have to end this now!

I wave my sword around one handed, not even letting my other hand around the wound, just grasping, holding onto something behind me, propping me up. The ghost, floats down still transparent. I keep waving my sword. Just keep it away.

I feel the hot liquid leaking down onto my pants now, feeling the wetness soak everything.

The ghost reaches the ground and starts sinking into it. I stop waving the sword. I know exactly what's going to happen. Through the screaming pain, my thoughts ring through.

It turns solid for half a second and rockets toward me. My sword pierces through its intangible face, into its open mouth, like a fucking sword swallower. I force the last bit of my pushing power through me, into my arm, into my hand holding the sword. I feel the force of the burst, it shoves weakly. The ghost continues, slower. Its open, screaming mouth slides along my sword. I back up, angling myself around the tree I was using for support. It turns tangible, and I rip my sword down.

The thing drops, my sword hitting some kind of bone. I just wiggle it around the whole damn thing. Fuck! I pull; it out, white, just dumping out-hemorrhaging from the ghost.

It stops moving. I let myself sit, my legs giving out against the tree. Fuck. I'm going to die if I don't get help. Shit! Need to reach out. I pull my bag close and open it up. The Telegraph sits right on top. I grab it with a red-stained hand and place it on the ground. I grab the knob begging in my mind for anyone as I tap out the pangram and a single word.

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Chapter 18

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I don't open my eyes yet. My body is too sore, not sore like I worked out too hard, the kind of sore that you get when a cut is half-healed and sensitive. But all over my body.

There's a sharp smell that hits my nose. No, it's more like it declares war on my nasal passages, little particles of whatever I smell turn to toy soldiers and march up my nose and into the cavity in my skull, firing their little smell guns in all directions. My body responds to this, flight or fight, shooting adrenaline into my heart, making it pump blood everywhere, giving me energy and removing the soreness from my body. My eyes shoot open as my fist is already halfway extended, smacking whatever is making me smell that stuff. A hand pushes my wrist aside.

A person, leaning over my bedside, holds a small bag by my nose. Their open palm holds my forearm and pushes it back down to the bed. I'm in a tent, there's a bed under me. I'm slightly above the woven stick floor. There's an elf on their knees next to me. Their face has a similar angular sharpness to Agot's,

but softer points. They smile and say something I don't understand. The syllables wash over my ears like a water wheel. I don't respond. They push on my shoulders, and I lay back down. They pull the soft covers off to poke and prod at my body, each time pressing on the areas around the soreness, recoiling whenever I tense up against the pain. I feel one particular part on the side of my neck that hurts. I hope that's not going to scar. I have absolutely no idea how I'd explain that to the band. Or grandpa, if he's still alive.

No, think about that after all of this.

They say more and look at me, probably expecting a response. I just shake my head. This person has similar features to Agot. Maybe they know them. So, I say that to them. "Agot," just the name, since they probably won't understand any other word I'd say. They nod and shift over to the side. They reach behind a short curtain, like what Agot had during their presentation. They pour something behind there and pull out a bowl filled with a milky substance. They take my arm and pour the liquid over it. I shudder as I feel the almost water-like slime seep into my skin and settle in that invisible space. Before they finish pouring, I shake my head. That place feels full. My mind flashes back to six years ago in the old car, the last time my Dad drove me in his Mercedes or let me eat at a buffet. I barely got the windshield open before my stomach acid coated the car paint and some of the leather interior. My arm stops absorbing the Talent juice. The person stops pouring and their brows knit together. They place their hand in the pooled liquid, and it slurps up, leaving the cot dry. The

caretaker pulls the blanket back on top of me, looking me in the eyes one more time before lifting the blanket partition and leaving.

In 237 seconds, the partition opens again. I counted, listening to the rhythm of the numbers instead of thinking. Agot's sharp features poke through. "Hello" they say, "Tlinka said you asked for me."

I look at their face. "What is that weird juice they poured into me?"

"She gave you some healing Talent. Though, she said that you didn't take it all."

I nod, feeling a little woozy. "I think I'm full?"

They raise their eyebrow at me. "Is that a human thing?"

"How the hell would I know? Maybe it's just a me thing."

"Well, it doesn't make any difference at this point," they smile showing sharp incisors, "You are one of only a few humans left after all."

Left? I bite back my question about what happened. I'll figure it out later. Maybe Nux will - Oh yeah. Nux is out of my life. Also, there are more than just me here? Either way there's something more important. "I need to buy more of that Talent." I say, then my brain catches "why did you give me any of the healing Talent? I hadn't bought it."

"Well, you incapacitated a ghost. They're extremely rare and dangerous, their Talent, is extremely valuable."

"It's not dead?" I ask.

“It’s a ghost.” Agot says, “It has been dead. But you can’t kill one again, at least not quickly. They do end up fading away after a while.”

“Faack,” I sigh.

“Don’t worry about the ghost, or the healing, for that matter.” Agot says, “Whatever you did to it drained the creature. It can’t seem to go through objects right now. So, we bound it and are trying to extract some of its Talent, whatever that may be.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Is it a Talent Slave now?”

“Of course not! This is only a temporary capture. This is an interesting situation, and a non-sentient creature attacking a valuable trade partner is no small crime,” they say, “I also feel that the loss of a few days of its... existence is worth much less to it than it is worth to us.”

“Glad I’m making you money.” My brain automatically shoots back, still sounds hypocritical.

“It is paying for your stay here and any information I provide,” their eyes stare into mine. “You look like you have many questions.”

I move my brain onto the topic at hand. I need information that I can use now. What is important to deal with now? Grandpa must be in a hospital. How do I protect him? I reply to Agot, “Yeah. But I don’t know if you’ll be able to answer them,” I say.

“Oh, that makes things interesting. Try me.” They lean back standing to their full, really tall, height.

“Is there something that controls ghosts?” I ask.

Their expression remains unchanged. “Nothing other than their own tragedies. None of them have any real thoughts beyond what brought them back.”

“The one I fought, the one that attacked my grandfather. It kept going on about my Grandmother telling it to do something, but nothing personal, just “Agnes told me.””

They look down, lips tightening in thought. “That makes absolutely no sense. Unless your grandmother’s request was something extremely important to the ghost, but that still doesn’t fit in with the tragedy. Though, those ruins you were near changes things as well,” they say. “Though, I suppose it’s my turn to ask some questions.” They look into my eyes. “Is there a portal in those ruins?”

I pause. How could they know of the portal? “What is the portal about?” I ask.

Agot’s lips tighten. There’s a moment of pause before they speak. “Humans have come through those portals in the past. The most recent time, though, nearly all of those portals were destroyed and destroyed an extensive trade network.” They take a slow breath. “Are you from one of these portals?” they ask.

“Yeah.” My jaw tightens with the implication of Agot knowing about the portal. More probably know. Anyone who heads through from this side could reveal everything. What would even happen? I already have the ghost issue. It’s

so close to Grandpa's house. Anybody could go after him so easily. And if it continues beyond the next couple days, the government will probably come in. The fuck would the human politics be for Agot coming over? Insane xenophobia, probably. At least the *Lord of the Rings* nerds will be happy.

"You don't have to worry." They say, basically reading my mind. "I have people guarding the perimeter. Nothing goes through without my orders."

"Thank you."

"Once you are better, we can discuss the terms of an expedition." They take my hand and give a soft smile. "For now, just rest." They place my hand on top of the covers, stand up, and walk out of the room.

My mind restarts after the complete meltdown their touch caused. Well then. Apparently, they're hot. I also might not be ace. That's some news. Wait, am I really crushing on an elf? Maybe. Should I actually try to date them? It'd be weird to explain to the family but fuck 'em. Except Grandpa. He's cool. Though, would Agot even like me? I suppose I do have the exoticism of being a human but-.

Wait a second. How old is Agot? They already have a job. I'm just a high schooler, not even age of consent. Nope! Nope for both of us.

Well... Maybe elves count their age in centuries. I mean, of course if that were true, they'd still be way too old for me, but maybe it would be okay. Like, I could probably date someone who's eighteen, maybe nineteen, and fifteen or fourteen. So, if we're counting in centuries, I don't think that's too bad. Like, at

that point, what does age even mean? Still, I shouldn't. Unfortunate. Even with all that, they're pretty cool. I'd hang out with them after this is all over. There's going to be an after. How the hell will I deal with that? Let's just get through this, then, I'll think about that.

With that, my aching body decides I've done enough thinking for a while and I just zonk out in the warm bed, hoping for dreams that are absolutely not about Agot. But maybe...

Chapter 19

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The world was really big again. I looked up to the kitchen counter, staring at the platter of “Parent drinks” I wondered what was in them that makes them not for kids. They had said it’s alcohol, but that doesn’t sound right. They had used alcohol all the time when I get scrapes and bruises. They had rubbed it all over the part that bleeds. So, it wasn’t the alcohol. Also, it didn’t make the little wet patches taste any good. Actually, they taste worse.

A bunch of people laughed in the living room. I wandered over. Each step I took covered a massive distance. I stretched out further and further, trying to be efficient. Otherwise, I might have run out of energy and have to take a nap again. There was a circle of grownups, all looking at someone in the center. I tried to peek through their legs. The person in the center was yellow with dark blue legs. Who could that be? I shoved my way through the legs, saying “squeeze me,” like mama had told me to do. I got to the front, and I saw Grandma in her summer dress, sitting on a big couch. She’s laughing. Her curly gray hair was poking out under her hat with green glady- gladio- green flowers, that she always loved. Her face had so many lines on it. Mom said they were

wrinkles, but I liked them as lines. I wondered who would draw so many lines on her face and on her skin. Though, they ran out of it when getting to her eyebrows. They were always hard to see. I think they used them up around her mouth. Grandma had a lot of lines around her mouth, smile lines she said. That made sense; she did smile a lot. I wondered what at. She noticed me with her big brown eyes.

“Pattycakes!” she yelled.

“Gramma!” I squealed, I felt some kind of squirmy energy the moment she said my name, and I threw myself up to her lap, clambering on like a tree.

“Ooh, you’re so good at climbing now!” she said

“Yup, I’ve been practicing on a lot of trees!” I grinned up to her face.

“Yeah? How high up have you gotten?” she asked,

“Real high,” I said, “like higher than all the boys have!”

“Wonderful!” Gramma always loved that word! “Show those nasty boys that us girls are awesome at whatever we want to do!”

“But you’re not a girl Gramma, you’re an old lady,” I said.

There’s a silence and short intake of air. A voice from the crowd starts

“Patr-“

Grandma bursts out laughing. “Well I suppose I’m not anymore, but back in my day, I was one wild child.” She smiles and her eyes twinkle with a vigor unfitting for her aged body, “but that just means you have to keep it going, be my little trooper and keep the battle going!”

I hop down and salute Grandma “Yes ma’am!” I run between the legs now clearing for me and bump into a pair that aren’t quite quick enough. I look up, and it’s grandpa. “Hi Grampa!” Wow! He’s actually at this party!

“Hello, have fun.” He stammers out.

I widen my smile at him and run outside, searching for the boys that need to be shown up.

“No. That’s wrong! Why would that be a thing?” I breathe. In, out. In, out. It doesn’t help. “No. That’s a coincidence! Why-” I stop and look at Agot.

They stare straight into my eyes, piercing me through.

Why would she be involved in this? I have no clue.

There was that thing Grandpa talked about. That’s her telegraph. Was this from the Nazis? What the hell did they do to her? No. She was happy. She loved everyone and had a wonderful life. That’s not what’s happening.

Someone pushes aside the cloth covering the doorway and speaks to me in a language I can’t understand. I look at them, stunned with their presence. They’re outfitted in some kind of dress or robe, blue and padded with thin boots with a belt and large satchel on their butt. They nod to Agot, then turn to stare back at me with yellow eyes. Their features are almost as angular as Agot’s, but softer at the edges. Their hair is pulled back, and they sit in a kneeled position, as if expecting an answer.

“What did they say?” I ask Agot.

They raise their eyebrows. Then explain, “She asked permission to borrow my attention from you.”

I scrunch my eyebrows. Whatever. Probably some cultural thing. “Sure,” and I nod, looking at her.

The elven woman looks back at me, then to Agot and says something again. Agot replies “Yes, she has given permission. Can you not understand, Larien?”

Larien says something else and Agot replies. They look to me, “She says thank you for your permission,” Agot stands and the pair talk quietly about something on the other side of the tent. I don’t really pay attention. Probably something private. Still, why can’t I understand Larien? Same thing as Nux’s writing? Huh, probably like that. Though, how can I speak their languages in the first place? Thoughts for later.

I lay back into the bed, letting my aching body rest. I feel the healing Talent ooze through my body, patching up the holes in blood vessels that caused the bruises. Ugh, weird. Still, better than having to recover normally. I wonder if I can get it to go faster. How, though? I focus on my body, feeling everything. I feel most of the pain in my stomach. Yeah, the ghost’s attack. That’ll probably be a scar. Let’s see if I can focus on that. I need to be able to get up and move. I need to get to Grandpa.

I focus on the invisible organ and the flow of Talent across my body. I feel the energy spreading throughout me, pooling all over, even the places that don’t hurt anymore. Breathe. In, out. In, out. Now it’s flowing, holding automatically. Let’s bring it in, pull it to my center. Pull to the middle, push from the outside, not hard. Let’s not hurt anything. Just restrict the flow. In, out.

I feel the energy start to flow away from my arms and face, instead redirecting down toward my stomach, filling it with the oozing power. In, out. That same feeling repeats from my toes, to my feet, to my calves, knees, and

thighs. It pours and pools around my stomach. I feel the muscle drink the Talent, slurping everything up and healing itself. In, out. Good. Hold. In out.

I feel my stomach heal faster, letting the stressed, swollen, torn muscles relax and reknit. Hold. Just breathe. Meditate, like in anger management out. Just hold still and keep the focus. In... Out... In... Out... In... Out...

“Pat”

I’m pulled out of my meditation by my name. I sit up to see Agot looking to me along with the elven woman.

“Thank you for waiting,” they say. “This is Larien, one of the scouts, and we want to ask for your help with a possible translation. She came with an important report, which, I think you may want to hear about as well. Is this a fair deal?”

“Sure, what is it?” I reply.

“In the report, Larien mentioned that there are many more ghosts being spotted. They are all coming from the northwest and heading almost in a straight line to the southeast right next to us, attacking anything in the way, and they’re all saying something that we don’t understand,” Agot says, “ But it’s possible you might. Would you mind repeating what the ghosts were saying to you?”

“Okay,” I say, raising my eyebrow, “He’s not dead, but I killed him.”

Agot turns to Larien and asks “Was that what they were saying?” The other elf says something I don’t understand in response. Agot turns back to me.

“Parts of what you said matched what they were saying. It seems that there is some kind of translation between you and me, but not for everyone. It seems that the ghosts are speaking in your language, mentioning the same thing. Though, there are a couple of other words being mentioned. Would you mind telling me what they are?” They turn to Larien and nod.

She speaks, saying two words a verb and a name, “Kill George?”

“That’s my grandfather’s name,” I say and sit up. My stomach aches, with the half-healed injury. “They’re trying to kill him and they’re heading through the portal to my world.”

I move, pulling myself onto my elbows. There’s a slight sound of cracking, as my bandages bend, and scabs break. Agot and Larien flinch. My stomach hurts, but it’s not bad. I don’t feel any blood. There’s no hot wetness, just a dull ache. I sit up and scooch myself over to my stuff piled in the corner.

I put on my boots.

Chapter 21

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I trudge down the grey stone stairs. The ruins are the same as I had left them. My stomach barely hurts anymore. The healing Talent seems to have taken care of it. There's plenty left in me, but I check my right pocket, where a small bottle with more rests, a purchase, to be paid back to Agot.

I turn back to the elves behind me. Agot, Larien, and three others step down from the broken sunlight. It only took Agot a few minutes to get them together. By the time I got down to the ground and walked out of the encampment, they were jogging behind me.

The three new people look geared up for a medieval war. They are all encased in thick canvas-ey coats carry and carry spears and large shields. Larien holds a bow, taller than herself, with a long bag of arrows strapped to her side. Agot carries that same wooden pick with a notch carved on the back side as when I first met them and three spear-like darts strapped to their back.

"Well, here it is," I say.

Agot nods to me, then turns to the rest, “Pat and I will go through and find her grandfather. The rest of you, stay here. Tell the others in the area to make sure nothing comes through.”

They all raise their hands, in some kind of salute.

Agot smiles to me, “Let us go.”

I nod and step through the snotty-skin portal. I don’t linger at all this time, just moving through. Not dealing with whatever that is any more than I have to.

It’s much darker than in the other world, the sunlight is much weaker, streaming over the edge of the horizon.

Agot pushes through the portal little-by-little, like I first did. They finally step through and onto the ground.

“You okay?” I ask.

“Yes, I’ll be fine. It’s a strange texture,” They say.

“Yeah,” I nod, “Let’s go.” Immediately, my phone starts buzzing and dinging. I hard press the power button and shut it off. “Sorry about that,” I say to Agot stomp through the woods, toward Grandpa’s house.

The house looks the same as I had left it, at least on the outside. Aged white paint and faded grey shingles frame the shuttered window eyes of the beast. The thing is anything but bland now. A cream yellow VW Beetle is parked alongside Grandpa’s car. Well fuck. Please don’t be Greg and Judy’s car. Though, it would be just tacky enough for them.

“Stay behind,” I say to Agot “I’m going to see if somebody’s there and try to ask them where Grandpa is,” I say, my mind is silent on real thought but screaming with emotions, rage, sadness, exhaustion, and hella annoyance. I walk over the fallen barbed wire fence and head toward the house, step to the side door and ring the doorbell like a trick-or-treater.

An urgent “Coming!” greets me. It’s Judy’s voice. Damn it. Hopefully Greg listened to grandpa and isn’t here.

The door opens. Judy, her hair pulled back with too many hairpins for her thinning scalp, opens her mouth to say something that I probably don’t want to listen to.

“Where’s Grandpa.” I don’t ask the question I demand it.

“Patricia, are you okay?” she turns back and calls out, “Greg, Patricia’s back!”

Fuck. He’s here. “Where’s Grandpa.” I hiss.

Judy grabs my arm trying to pull me in “Come on honey, you look terrible. We’ll take you to George after the police ask you some questions.”

I rip my arm from her hand. “Fuck no. You tell me where he is right the fuck now.” I hold back the ‘there are ghosts hunting him’ part.

Greg bursts through the door, “What did you just say to my wife?” His face screws up in that satisfying indignation that screams ‘You are younger than me. You will respect me and correct your behavior.’ Greg actually says, “You may be George’s granddaughter, but you never have the right to talk to

your elders like that.” Different words. Same meaning. Fuck respect Fuck authority.

“Fuck you, Greg!” I scream. I take a breath, glaring into his eyes. He turns beet red. A moment to think - can’t tell the truth. Lies work better with angry old people. “I’ve been dealing with assholes kidnapping me and that’s what you say.” Oh, and there’s one more thing. “Just tell me where he is, and I’ll deal with the rest. Grandpa told you to fuck off, Greg! You already assaulted me and left bruises!”

Judy looks at him with wide eyes.

“Neither of you are related nor legal guardians. You can’t do shit with me. So, help or get out of the way.” Spiteful research is the best.

He steps back, stunned at my verbal assault. Then lunges and latches onto my arm.

“Listen here brat. I’m doing this as a favor to an old friend. I will not be treated this way.” As he speaks his fingers dig into my arm, the same spot as the first time, “So, if you don’t grow up and take it, then you can expect no help from me. Now, we’re going to the police station, where you will talk to the officers about what you did here and your story about kidnapping.”

I don’t move. These two are useless. Greg stares down like he’s trying to shame or scare me into complying, but I’m not scared. “I’m not the one latched onto an underage girl’s arm making the same mistake twice.” I can fight back now.

I think back to that classroom and the anger management lessons. Brent, the teachers were wrong to chase me, to grab me. Nobody else will do that to me. I can take care of myself. I am making this decision with a calm mind. The pushing Talent flares through my body. It gathers at the end of my immobile arm and bursts, knocking Greg back into his wife.

“Don’t touch me,” I say “Where the fuck is my grandpa? It’s just one fucking sentence.” My voice raises. “Spit it out, and I’ll be gone! Why the hell are you so reticent!” Okay not completely calm.

Judy catches Greg and yells back, “Stop, both of you! He’s at Tuckner Hospital! Now let’s all calm down and head over.” She meets my eyes, pleading.

I lower my fists, calming down, feeling a little sorry for what I did.

Then Greg sucker punches me in the face. “You threw the first blow. I have no idea in hell what you did, but I am not afraid to defend myself or my family.”

I fall to the ground and scabble back, unable to even speak. A sharp tangy taste floods my mouth. I spit out the blood and stand up, the invisible organ’s power boils over. The bruise on my arm is forgotten. Instead, my muscles tighten, and I clench my fists. I cock my boot back to kick.

A form darts from the trees, closes the distance and slams a palm into Greg’s face. It hooks a wooden pick through my belt, grabs the front of my jacket and hauls me toward the trees. I scream as Greg hits the dirt, the meaty slapping sound of the attack rings in my head.

“What the fuck!”

Judy screams.

We break the tree line and a voice behind me says “Shhh, it’s okay. It’s me.”

Agot’s voice registers in my mind, and I stop struggling.

They walk deeper into the wood, dragging me out of sight of the house. Actually, it’s kind of nice being carried by them.

“We need to find another way,” Agot places me down and unhooks the pick from my belt.

I breathe hard, coming down off of the adrenaline of the situation. “I understand,” I reply. “Sorry I screwed up.”

“I don’t think you did. You were trying to get something, and that human attacked you. I can’t let this happen to my trade partners.” they say. “You-“

Agot interrupts themselves and their ears perk up. They turn to the direction of the portal. I look over and there’s nothing, but in a moment there’s a form running toward us, quiet, despite them running so fast on sticks and roots. As they get closer, I see red on their body.

Chapter 22

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It's Larien. She speaks hurriedly to Agot. Her sleeve is torn. There's a lot of red on her arm, and she's breathing hard. "Okay," Agot nods and runs forward with her. I follow the best I can, but I can't keep up with their pace and fall behind. I reach the portal and push through, the disgusting film clinging to me as I rush through. I climb up the stairs. The guards we left are fighting off transparent forms of people close to the hole I just came out of. There are a lot of ghosts, old, young, cleanly dressed or with bullet holes in their clothes. The guards are outnumbered. On the right-side, an elf jabs out and through a transparent ghost with their spear. The spirit phases through the strike and reaches its hand into the guard's chest and becomes solid. The elf moves to the side at the last second, as their chest explodes, their clothing tears away with a red stain.

I rush to the battle and draw grandpa's blade. There are a half-dozen ghosts attacking. I rush forward to the elf I saw earlier, still standing but back facing me. I watch the ghost retreat, floating back, transparent. The elf strikes

again, harmlessly passing through. I reach them, touch their shoulder to let them know I'm here. They barely spare a glance at me, instead taking some kind of defensive posture in front. The ghost floats down, allowing the elf to advance, I'm right behind. The ghost about to land. I rush around the elf, and stab forward just as the ghost is about to land. Its face turns to panic, as my sword stabs into its head. Its nice shoes hit and pass into the ground, as I keep my blade inside it. Finally, it makes a decision and ducks out from under my blade, scrunching into a ball, pulling its legs out from the ground, only leaving its feet and bits of its ass, like its cannonballing into the earth. Then it turns solid. The ground explodes and the ghost goes flying up and back, my blade barely nicking it on the leg.

I notice the little bits of gray mist coating the ground. It feels similar to the stuff from earlier with the other ghost. Probably the blood again. Though, it feels like it's leaking into my body, coldness seeping through my ankles up to the invisible organ.

I turn my attention back to the ghost, fully solid and running forward again. I glance at the elf behind me. The handprint of missing skin from the ghost's attack leaks blood down their breasts. they stare intently at the ghost and me. I hold my hand back, stepping fully in front of her.

The ghost takes a running leap, turning transparent in front of me. I let it get close, holding the sword between myself and it.

I breathe in. Keep the breath's timing. It floats toward me, my blade pressing through its form. Stay to the rhythm.

Out, its hand reaches toward me. Timing, it's all about timing.

In, I let it get just a little closer. Its transparent body presses though my sword.

I hiss out my last breath and push on the ghost with my Talent, letting the energy flow through my body out through the air and into the thing, shoving it away just as it would have touched me. For a moment, the thing goes backward. However, it turns opaque as I force its timing off. I slice my blade down, shoving it through the stomach of the ghost, letting the gray mist inside it pour out. It stumbles back. I retreat, resetting, waiting for the next assault from the thing.

However, it doesn't come. Instead, the thing seems to strain, the gray mist stops pouring from its body. It falls to the ground, still trying to crawl forward.

In, out. It's fine. I just dealt with it. In, out. Incapacitated, not killed. In, out. Again. I'm fine. Just deal with the rest of the situation. These emotions can be dealt with later. Just. Not. Now. Just treat them like her. Keep it for later. In, out.

I look back to the elf I was protecting, checking on them. They're still standing, but that red blotch is getting worse. I look away. It seems that the rest are doing a little better. Agot's yelling out commands I can't understand,

hooking darts onto the pick and launching them through the ghosts. Larien holds a bunch of arrows in her hand, drawing and launching one after the other into the ghosts. There are a couple of them on the ground, barley moving, each leaking white from many, *many* holes in their bodies.

“Agot,” I yell, “Only attack them when they’re opaque. They’re intangible otherwise!”

“We’re trying! These things just,” they throw their last dart at a ghost as it falls back, “It’s just not doing much damage.”

I look at the holes, each of them leaking only little bits of the mist. I notice the elves’ weapons. Spears, darts, and arrows. All stabbing weapons. Not getting much of the mist out.

Agot barks out one last order and the elven guards close together, forming a short line with their shields, placing them between the ghosts and themselves, using the spears to poke out between, but the ghosts just keep rushing forward and back, phasing through each assault. I take my sword and rush forward toward the battle line. In, out. Remember, timing, get their rhythm. I stare at the closest ghost, it falls back, about to strike the ground, then a spear darts out to hit it in the stomach. The ghost takes the hit and bounces forward, leaking a slight trail of mist as it turns intangible. I rush around toward that ghost.

“Pat, what are you doing?” Agot yells.

“I can get them. Just keep everyone out of my way!” I reply.

“Okay, everyone, keep out of the human’s path. She has something.”

The ghost reaches out toward the closest guard’s shield, its hand reaches inside the leather and wood. I stab my sword forward into the ghost, just before it turns tangible. The colors become opaque, and I feel that force, and rip my sword out the thing’s side. It bursts open with the mist. Next one. I run forward, it’s retreating, foot about to strike the ground. Again, stab, yank. Third time, but this one reacts differently. It phases just as I’m about to strike, sinking into the ground. The thing reaches out toward my leg, I shove it with the pushing Talent. It turns tangible, rockets out of the ground, the entire lower body leaking little bits of white mist. I point my sword to the sky. It stares down at me as it impales itself, reaching toward me, intangible, I shove it again, just as it turns tangible and yank my blade through.

I’m covered in mist. It rains down on top of me. It leaks inside, reaching through me into the invisible organ, as I absorb the new Talent as it falls. I turn to Agot, breathing heavy. They smile.

Then a loud crack shatters the air. I recognize that sound.

My throat hitches, Tommy.

I hear the wailing even above the approaching sirens. I'm sitting quietly in Firio's arms. We're sitting in the greenroom, away from the crowd. They're crying into my shoulder. I don't cry. I feel the blood soak into my shirt. I feel my toes ache in my boots. My whole body is shaking. If I didn't have my boots, Firio would have died. I know that. Firio's damp warmth on my shoulder feels comforting. I put my arms around him.

A flash bursts through the trees, creating a second sun between the trunks. I clamp my eyes closed, pain ripping through my head. I blink spots out of my eyes and see Agot. They're on the ground in a fetal position. The scream is wordless, ripping through the air as loud as the bang. The red under their skin gone for its normal color.

I rush over to them and reach out, hesitating a second before I put my hand on their back and kneel down next to them. The moment my skin makes contact, Agot stops screaming, closes their mouth and tenses hard, shaking, quivering.

I just stay there, my eyes widened and looking around to the others. They stare back at Agot and I.

Agot eventually stops shaking and opens their mouth.

"Go, that sound was at the encampment. Something's there," They yell, "Everyone who can, go. If you're injured, stay."

No! They were supposed to be safe! This was supposed to be the one thing that stayed safe! No, breathe. In, out. It's fine I can deal with it. In, out. Keep to now. Don't put it off. In, out. Fix the situation. "Will you be okay?" I ask.

"Just give me some time. I'll be there soon."

"All right," I reply, "I'll contact you by the telegraph when it's dealt with."

"Good. Take some of my Talent, as partial payment for your help." They touch my arm, and I feel the liquid electric power in their fingertips, ready to flow. But I'm full. The Talent can't enter. Only three.

"One sec!" I say, and I swing off my bag, pulling the telegraph box out. I pass my hand over it and feel the lightness Talent leave my body. There's only a little left. Nux never gave me much.

The new power finally flows from Agot into me, filling the invisible organ with another liquid Talent.

"That Talent should help you run faster. It'll heighten all of your senses. So, channel it away from your head for now. Go," Agot says, "

I rush to follow the others, who are already bounding to the forest. I can see the backs of Larien and one of the guards. I bolt forward, channeling this new Talent. My touch expands, I feel each muscle tensing and releasing as I run, the orientation of the surface of the ground and gravity underneath me, and my body's exact orientation in the world. It rushes to my head, sounds become louder, the world brighter, more vivid. No, channel it away. I pull the Talent down, back into my body. Focus on that. Breathe and run. In, out. Feel

the run. Each step plants firm in the boots, though, the sole in the ground is a little more difficult. Still, the weight of the boot is comforting. As I focus, everything in my body tunes to a fine point. My pace increases. I don't feel tired anymore. My whole body, my kinesthetic sense keeps me balanced, despite running at a breakneck pace through the tangle of trunks and roots of the forest. I hit that perfect rhythm, everything moves exactly as it should, with the drumbeat of my heart to the tempo of my breath, punctuated by thumping footfalls. It feels great. Then another bang resounds through the woods, accompanied by a flash, much smaller this time. I look to it. Though, I miss, I can't seem to locate the flash. I notice familiar trunks all around. I'm at the encampment now. The trees are spattered by red drops. A body lays amongst the roots.

Another flash, but I'm ready for it this time and close my eyes before it can do any damage. I blink open to see a flitting form in the trees. The elves in my party scramble up the sides of the trees, hugging the trunks and scrambling up into the canopy. There aren't any hanging ropes or ladders. I have to do something!

I pull out my telegraph and rush in the pogram, connecting to Nux.

.. ... / - / -.- -.- ..- IS THIS YOU

The wind swishes, light tramping from the elven footfalls form the rhythms.

... -.- -.- / -.- ..- STAY OU

The T is punctuated with another bang, the quieter one. Then a thump onto the ground. An elven body lays right in front of me, a little red hole in the left side of its head. But a grey and red slurry soaks the ground and some of my clothes.

“Fuck!” I scream at the top of my lungs. I run around a tree to my left and just hide behind it, the wood and metal of the telegraph key digs into my skin. My hands are shaking. I grab the knob and tap.

... - --- .-. / ... - --- .-. / ... - --- .-. STOP STOP STOP

I don't know if I tapped it right, but the gunshots and the thumping and the sounds of feet on the ground spell out another word.

.-. . .- ...- . LEAVE

I glance around the tree, in the direction of the ghosts. How much time do I have? I don't know. How many more are dying? I don't know! Oh fuck, they're dying! What the hell do I do? How do I get up? Agot's still gone! No! I need help! I can't do this!

I take a breath. In, out. Block everything out as much as possible. What do you know for sure? Nux has a gun and is firing at the elves. What else? He's killing them. What else. Help will take too long. Why will it take too long? People are dying, and the ghosts could be anywhere. You have to figure this out. Now, how do you stop this situation? What do you know? When dealing with an active shooter in your school, run, hide, and as a last resort, confront. You can't run or hide. So, you have to confront. What tools? I have my boots, a sword, the

elven sensing Talent, a little bit of healing, and whatever the ghosts were leaking, some kind of phasing and floating power, I think. I open my eyes.

Looking into the distance, I see figures bounding through trees. Out of time. I think I can do something. Yeah. That's that one plan left. Let's try it. There's a flash out of the corner of my eye. Muzzle flash. I get back behind the tree, one breath, two, three. Go.

I look back to where the muzzle flash came from. A flitting form carries some kind of short gun, not a pistol but too short for a rifle. It's flying slow, the weight of the gun seeming to weigh it down. I get up from behind the tree, step back for a running start, channel the elven Talent, then bolt. I run three steps and launch myself forward.

Fucking work!

I cancel the agility and channel the ghost's Talent through my entire body.

The whole world goes dark.

Chapter 24

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Everything is so dark and faded, except for some bright person-shaped lights. I can't hear anything either. Shit. I look around. There's a mass of dark grey in one direction. What's that? I start to make out a different color, slight green tints come from trees around me. I look down as I feel myself float forward. The faded color of grass slowly comes closer to me. I hear a small pop and a tiny flash in the dark and quiet. I look up and one of the motes of light winks out. I glance over to where the pop came from. There's a little prick of light, very small. I'm getting closer. I'm almost there now. I look down again. My feet are almost on the ground. Okay. Once out, two things, grey mass, and pop direction.

I stop the ghost power and stumble to the ground. My hands fly in front of me, slamming, scraping on the hard bark of a tree. I look to the left. There's a hazy white. No, can't make it out. Okay, I need to know what this is. I allow a little of Agot's sensing Talent up and into my head. My vision zooms in. It's ghosts. Hopping and gliding in their strange way. Fuck, Nux first. I look up. There's glint of black polished metal. No branches to climb up to him, no

ladders. I have to jump. Fuck. Again! I have to deal with this now before the ghosts get here.

I get my legs under me, get into a jumping position, and look up. The bend of the tree is right above me. I might hit the branch Nux is on. No, I can't phase through something. Just, shit.

I channel the sensing through my body and feel my muscles tighten, placing my body in the perfect position to jump. I leap up, much higher than I should, almost to the lowest branch, and latch onto the trunk of the tree. I feel my palms scrape, ten times worse than normal, my entire body so sensitive to touch.

"FUUUUCK," I scream and reach up to a low branch, just a few more feet. I reach up and loop my arms a little higher on the trunk, and finally grab the branch above me, the lowest on the tree and pull myself up. I take a quick breath. In, out. Use the rhythm. Next one. I look up and grab another, hauling myself up. Next one! Nux is right above me.

"Nux, stop now!" I yell at him.

"No!" he stares down at me, a new look on his face, fear? He screams at me "What the hell was that. I shot you!" He yanks at his gun, like yanking a heavy couch. He shoves it getting close to pointing it at me.

My body tenses, a gun. A gun! A Gun!

No! I can't slip into that flashback! Keep here! Nux is the one doing this, not Tommy! I rush forward, slapping the gun away and grabbing Nux.

“You fucking traitor,” Nux hisses out. “You fucked all of this up.”

Tommy said the same thing to Firio.

My anger completely takes over. The attempted murderer, no, actual murderer in my hands wriggles like a rotting grub. I’m done with all of this. I don’t even breathe as I squeeze and rattle Nux.

“F-fine. Let - me - go,” he struggles to get out “It hurts.”

“Good,” then, I hear and feel a crack.

Nux screams.

That snaps me out, and I look down, all my anger and strength gone. I almost just let him fall. Shit! I can’t do this! Breathe!

In, out, in, out.

Okay, come on. Just think. It’s not working.

In out in out.

This is too much, I got angry again!

Inoutinoutinout

Fuck! The ghosts!

I look down. I can see them. They’re almost here.

Get everyone off the ground!

I lay Nux in the crotch of our branch and jump. I swap to the Ghost Talent, floating down, then swapping to the agility Talent, letting its instincts take over. I roll on the ground and grab an elf, that I think is still alive.

The line of ghosts gets closer. I can see it.

Then, I hear a familiar voice.

“Pat! Status!” Agot yells from behind me.

I look back, “Agot! The gun’s gone, but the ghosts!” I point.

They don’t question and look to where I’m pointing. They bellow, “Get off the ground, whoever’s moving get those who can’t into the trees.”

I see blurry movement all around, elves going faster than I thought was possible except in movies. Fuck, I can’t track everything., It’s too much. Just.

“Save yourself Pat!” Agot doesn’t even look to me as they haul the body, I had up a rope ladder into the branches of a tree.

I just look over to the oncoming horde of ghosts. They get closer.

Breathe!

“Pat!” Agot screams.

I come back. The ghosts are in front of me. I can’t run. I can’t hide.

I channel the phasing.

My boots sink into the ground. Then, I release it.

My knees and ankles feel a sharp pain, and my whole body launches up. I channel the ghost Talent again. It feels weird as branches and leaves pass through my body. I feel halfway through. My momentum begins to reverse, I’m going down, back through the canopy, the darkness and silence all consuming, only faded bits of shadow showing where anything is. I look down. Okay, just grab the last branch as I fall.

I see it. The wood passes through my face. It floats slowly above my head. I track it with my hands. Then, I release the phasing.

The world comes back. I latch my hands onto the branch and channel the acuity.

A horde of gray and transparency floods under me.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” is all I can say as I breathe.

The group of ghosts rush under me. I grip hard to the branch. My arms and hands shake as I hold myself up with every bit of strength I can muster. Breathe. In, out. I close my eyes. Focus, arms and breathing just those. In, out. My arms begin to sweat. Someone reaches around and grabs the back of my jacket, hauling me up and over to rest atop. I look up, it's nobody I recognize. They look down, standing in front of me. I nod and smile. They do the same and walk away, not even looking back.

I look down again. The ghosts have passed by. They just leap into the distance, not even the air. There's a spray of red, as something explodes under it. Shit! They're headed toward Grandpa!

I stand up and start burning the agility Talent. Okay, just walk over to one of the platforms. I look around.

There are groups of elves on each platform, each looking around and talking. I don't understand a word, but the worry is palpable. There's a platform

one built into the root of my branch. I walk over, holding my balance easily with the Talent, and step down onto the whicker floor.

Next, Agot. They'll be able to get people to protect the portal. Find them. I scan the faces. I can see. Nothing. The telegraph! I pull it out of my bag and tap out the pangram.

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The wind picks up and trees swish all around, forming the morse in its swaying rhythm.

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Okay, ladder down. I look around for a ladder connected to the platform. Nothing, I walk all the way around the trunk, ducking under a green and brown colored tent. There isn't even a rope bridge. I look down. There are a couple down on the ground. Well, shit. I'll have to jump. Without the adrenaline, the ground looks so far away. I sit down on the edge. You did this before. Just use the Ghost Talent to float down, then, agility to land. I check the reserves of my Talents, reaching into that invisible organ. I have so much of both, and even the pushing Talent I feel full on, barely any difference than when I got it.

Okay, so jump. Breathe, In, out. Jump.

I slip off the edge of the platform, activating the ghost Talent. The world turns dark again, but I can see a little better. I know what to expect. The ground is a faded green glow. I get close and release, falling about a foot. I don't even need to use any of the agility Talent. The backpack thumps against my back as

my legs absorb the impact. I look around and see Agot, kneeled down next to one of the trees. They pick something up.

I rush over to them; my boots crush the grass as I run. Agot turns and glares at me.

“Did you make those Talents for him?” they ask. Their tone is even and cold.

I stop in my tracks, unable to respond.

“You’re a human, and it’s apparent that this pixie was able to get some complex Talents out of nowhere,” they say.

Breathe! In, out. Just tell them something. Lie! Grain of truth. “I – I needed to learn how to make Talents to trade with you. He forced me to make those!”

Agot stares at me, “Did you give him this weapon?” They hold up a gun.

I see Tommy.

No! Breathe. Stay in the moment. In, out. My boots are on my feet. In, out. The air is warm. In, out. My body is shivering. In, out. In, out. In, out.

They put it down. “You know what it is. It’s killed four members of my team today and injured three more.” I hear their voice, but my eyes are locked onto the grass. I fall to my knees. The ground is closer now. Agot continues, “Nuxinor’s parents were arrested as part of an insurrection and died in prison. They tried to kill all the elves on the council. I was hoping he would be different.”

I gulp down one more shaky breath. “He’s still up there,” I croak.

Agot’s voice is closer, “Good.” The cold tone softens, “Thank you for warning us. It could have been worse. I am sorry you had to contribute.”

There’s a thump beside me. I look to it.

It’s the gun.

It sits still, the barrel pointed away. In, out. I breathe. In, out. It doesn’t move. It’s fine. I don’t see Tommy. I don’t feel anger. I just feel exhausted. I place my hand on the metal. It’s slightly cold. I wrap my hand around the handle. It fits into my palm. I keep my finger away from the trigger. I don’t want to touch that. I hold it. I hold the gun. In, out. I’m okay. I sit up on my knees, zip open a cargo pocket, and slide it in. It doesn’t fit all the way, but good enough. I zip it mostly closed. The wooden handle sticks out of my pocket, ready to draw and kill. I breathe. In, out.

I stand up. I can’t put things off anymore. I need to deal with the problems. Next step. I need to stop the ghosts. I turn around to face Agot.

“I’m going to find where those ghosts are coming from,” my voice sounds strong. I don’t. “I want to trade. I need someone to protect my grandfather while I deal with whatever’s going on.” I turn around to look at Agot, who has one hand on a knotted rope.

Agot stares into my eyes, then looks up, and looks back to me, “What are you offering?”

“You wanted complex Talents, right?” I say, “I can make them now.”

Their eyes narrow, “This is a huge risk,” they say, “You’ll have to make it worth me losing even more than I already have.”

A number. I need a number. “One hundred!” I say. “I’ll make one hundred combinations, if you can protect my Grandfather.”

They look up, then down, then back to me. “For one hundred I will send people to protect your grandfather. They will be outfitted with appropriate weaponry and Talents to defeat ghosts.”

A wave of relief rolls over me.

“However, I will require another trade to accompany you. Ten combinations.”

“Why?” I ask.

They grin, “I need to insure my investment. Is this fair?”

I nod, “If you answer one more question, yes..” Energy returns to my body, little by little.

“Which is?” They ask.

“How old are you?”

“Seventeen decades.”

I grin. Not what I was thinking, but good enough.

Chapter 25

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We bolt forward, Agot and me. The only sounds I hear are my heavy breathing and boots on the ground. Occasionally we pass a ghost, jumping in that strange way, heading back the way we came. I don't let them distract me. They don't seem to notice us. They just keep leaping. In out. In, out. I let the agility Talent burn inside me, controlling my body's movements, the rhythms. I don't think of anything, just experience the last moments before everything changes again. The sky gradually turns violet. Red mixes with the blue, then deepens. I feel my lungs heave and my body become exhausted. Agot has us take a short rest before we start again. There's barely any blue anymore. I should save my strength for whatever happens there. Still, it's good that I'm going so hard. I don't have to think about what I almost did to Nux. What I almost did to Tommy.

In, out. In, out. In, out.

I just breathe and pump my legs running as fast as I can for as long as I can. Then, we see it.

The edge of the world bleeds scarlet, or at least the edge that I see looming ahead of me. There's still a slight tinge of blue in the distance to the left and right. The red coagulates into some kind of tear too tall and wide for me to guess at it all. The space ahead is torn, like ratty, old cloth. Fear and awe swirl inside me as I run forward, arms and heart pumping, a strange dusty taste flowing in and out of my mouth. My lungs itch inside my body. The invisible organ churns. I feel ill. Even at a distance, I can't see the whole thing, but I can see the transition, what's this world, and what is being torn to show. There transparent forms there, on that other side. Hordes meander around, but I feel a push in one direction. Something in the invisible organ tries to guide me away, but at this point, my brain concludes that's where I need to go. My eyes water, like if I stared at the sun too long.

I turn my gaze to the ground below me, making sure I don't trip on anything, even though Agot's Talent burns inside my organ. That and healing burn at once, letting me go fast and deal with the injuries from the past week. Fuck, I'd only been at Grandpa's for a week before this all happened. Well, here's hoping I can get back and stay for the rest of the time.

I yank my mind back to the scene at hand. Running and breathing. Agot runs a little in front, looking ahead. I need a plan. There's probably going to be a fight with some of the ghosts. I glance at Agot. They carry another spear, but this one has a long blade on the end, something better at cutting up the ghosts,

and bleeding out their Talent. Okay, that's good. Not sure how we'll close the tear. This is something to do with Grandma. That ghost said Agnes wants her husband. That confirms it. Shit, I have to deal with that. She's still out there. Still, some kind of Talent. I slap my backpack with my elbow, feeling the wooden box in there, holding the Talents not inside my body. I only have the sensing, healing, and ghost phasing stuff right now, but the box has a bunch more if I run out of something. We get close to the edge, close enough to make out the individual ghosts. So many of them are so old, doddering around beyond that border like they have no idea what's going on. The women look like they're in their Sunday best. The men in suits, tailored to fit. Dapper.

I race forward, the sickening feeling getting worse and worse, the organ sloshing the Talent juice inside, it's almost like a bumpy car ride, I feel like I'm going to throw up. Not actually, but the equivalent with that thing. I open my mouth to ask if that's something normal, but I spot her, a transparent old woman standing beyond the barrier in her late seventies in a blue and yellow sundress wearing a purple cloche hat with green gladioluses ringed around the bump talks to a gathered crowd of ghosts.

“Grandma!?”

She turns to face me a wide smile on its too pale face. “Pattycakes?”

I redouble my run, rushing toward her. I see the familiar smile lines, welcoming green eyes, and plump silhouette that made the perfect lap to rest on. Every thought but how much I missed my grandmother disappears.

Then the organ vomits. I drop to the ground. Talents sweat through my body, ejected by the resonance that I now feel from the ghost Talent. It sweats out of my body, little bits dripping from my skin. Then they activate, all three at once. The world goes half-dark, the ground feels like quicksand, I feel every blade of grass cut into my body, but it stops hurting the moment it enters, the wounds healing while they're being made. I keep on my hands and knees, my internal balance becoming sharp, acute muscles prevent me from collapsing further. My brain races past the senses of my body. I take a breath. The air is sweet and spicy, but reeks of sulphur. What the hell is going on. Grandma's involved? How? She died a few weeks ago. This is only happening now. Maybe it's a coincidence. No, I look up. She reaches into the red and pulls another pale form out. She smiles. I look forward into her eyes, and the usual happy twinkle is gone. She's still smiling, looking absolutely elated, except for the eyes. She looks down to me again, turning that smile in my direction. My Talents are going berserk. They're all going off at once. Wait, all three?

My heart stops. The invisible organ seizes, something strains, my soul stretching, my mind falling apart, something strains to keep up and not tear or break. It goes too far, then snaps back, the yanking force releases.

A hand is on my back. I look up to see grandma kneeled over me.

"Shh, it's fine. Just give it a minute. It takes a while to get used to the air over there, even when you're dead," she pats my back, "Now, remember this

feeling when you have a boy offer you a drink at a college party. I guarantee you that you will feel just as nasty the next day.”

“I will Grandma,” I start feeling better, the organ hurts, but I lean back and look up to her face, “It’s good to see you.”

“Good to see you too Pattycakes. Now could you do me a big favor?”

Grandma asks.

“Yeah.”

Her eyes give a slight twinkle, “Kill your Grandfather for me please.”

I shoot back to reality, my brain regaining context. I’m surrounded by ghosts; I whip my head around. Agot, nowhere to be seen. I bolt up, Grandma, still smiling, stands up with me. I check my Talents, all there, less, but refilling, I look down the various liquids seep into me. Disgusting. Am I doing the Talent equivalent of drinking my own vomit? Ugh. Questions for later. Right now. It feels a little better, but something’s different. It feels like something’s changed. I feel like something’s changed about me. The world feels like something’s changed. My heartbeat slows. My thoughts sharpen. Grandma’s dead. This thing is warped and wrong. This isn’t the same person who had me in her lap so many times. She’s not the one was in that coffin!

Grandpa could die. I could die, and this is where I’d go if I did. I stand up and turn around, away from the red. The organ resonates again, but not with sickness, with power and energy. I turn around, shoving a pair of old men

ghosts, and bolt forward, away from the red, toward a now visible shine of blue light.

“Stop her, would you kindly,” Grandma calls out.

The surrounding ghosts reach their hands out and grab me. I try to use the phasing Talent, turning the world dark, but another set of hands still hold on. I look through the shadow and see another ghost, completely formed. I phase through a few pairs, but those hands stick to my body. I end the phasing in the middle of the crush of ghosts. They shunt out of me, shoving me into a million directions, all the forces combining to crush me into myself. I feel my bones creak as I slam into the ground. No clue how bones can creak, but now I know they can. Grandma’s voice cuts through the chaos.

“I was wondering what was taking George so long to come here. I thought he would kill himself within the week, maybe the day of my funeral,” she smiles with a sweetness sickening in this context, “but I can see now, he was taking care of you. How nice of him, and how nice of you to keep him alive. You don’t need to anymore. Just go back to the city and let him die on his own. He’ll be happier here.”

I just stare at grandma, no, her ghost. The ghost is different than the person.

“You’re sick!” I yell getting to my knees. This is just another adult who doesn’t care, another who doesn’t understand. “Do you even realize how fucked what you’re saying is?”

The thing that looks like my grandma gestures to the redness, “But look at this place, it’s so beautiful! Now that I have somewhere to bring him, it will be a lovely for an afterlife.”

“But it’s still death!” I scream, I’m on my feet now. I need a plan. I need to get these ghosts back into the red. She, no, It has control over all of the other ghosts. I need to stop it.

That friendly voice cuts through my thoughts, “Oh Pattycakes, you don’t know anything about death or life for that matter. George has had such a terrible life. We both did, but once the war ended, we were able to get past most of it. But, he could never let his squad mates go and I couldn’t let my years in the bunker lab go either. That’s fine. Now that I’m dead, I’ve let all of that go. You’ll understand. Death isn’t so bad, especially when compared to life. I’m probably the first person who died in your life. Once it happens a few more times, it becomes the same as just not seeing somebody anymore, and we do that all the time.”

I just shut up at that. What the fuck. If this’s what’s waiting for me after death, I’d prefer to live forever, even if it means dealing with being geriatric for most of it.

It continues, “How about we move on from George and come to you! You’re here, and you have Jaeneung !”

Jaeneung ? Talents maybe, but I’m done listening to her. Where is Agot?
I start calling out for them, “Help!”

But the ghost cuts through my screams with her tiny voice. “You must have run away from him to come here. George must be so sad. Did you even tell him about all of this? You probably couldn’t. I couldn’t.”

It just doesn’t give up. I can’t reason with it anymore. I can’t fight its whole army alone. What the hell can I do? I lie. “Fuck you! I actually told him,” add a grain of truth, “and the only reason I’m here is because he’s in the hospital.” Fuck this. Let’s just go for it. “You want to kill him, do it yourself, or even better, kill me first!” I spit the words out.

The ghost’s face turns to horror. “Now why would I do that? You have a full life ahead of you.”

I need something! Why would she want to kill me with her warped logic? How can I get some kind of power in this situation? Say something! “Because I’ll be arrested!” I lie. Okay, let’s go further with it. Why? “The police think that I tried to kill Grandpa because I’m the only one around for miles.” My mind races, using the only thing I can in this situation. “I’ll be a felon, locked in jail, and the probation with Tommy will hit too! My parents will throw me out, and the only way I’ll get out of this is if he wakes up and tells them what you did!”

“Oh no! Gretchen must have done a horrible job with it,” Grandma covered her mouth with her hand in surprise.

Huh, people actually do that.

She continues, “So only one of us can get what they want here. Either both of you live or both of you die. You will never hear that I was a selfish

woman in life. In death, that will be no different. That is fair.” She turns to the ghosts, “Let her go. Pattycakes has dealt with enough. We’ll give her a chance.” The hands recede, and Grandma turns back to me, “You’ve made a good friend. He’s been trying to get to you this whole time. So many of these ghosts have been out through a lot of trouble to keep him away. They really care about you. If you live, keep him around. The ghosts step aside, revealing Agot standing with the spear extended down and back like an oar, surrounded by a shallow white mist. I run straight toward them.

“I’ll give you an hour to say your goodbyes,” Grandma calls out.

I turn my back to the ghost.

“What was that?” Agot asks. They drop to one knee, breathing hard.

“That’s my-” The words die out in my throat. Come on. you’re facing it now. Say it. “That’s my grandma, and there’s something very wrong with her,” I take a breath, in, out and let the rhythm of my breaths calm me.

Agot jerks their face up, “What do you need from me?”

I look down at the trampled, once green, grass. “I have no clue.” For once my brain is quiet. The constant racing is gone. There are no words or images coming, no plans forming. Nothing. Just, the feeling that Grandma’s dead. The one time it quiets down. Ugh, fuck. How the hell do I start this stupid brain again.

I take a breath. In, out. Basics. Just focus on the basics. I’m going to fight. I have to beat a ghost. I’ve done it before. This one is smart though, an

anomaly. I tap my backpack with an elbow. It touches a leather scabbard. I have my sword. I hit the other side, through the cloth. A clacking sound emerges. I also have the Talents. Nux's mass reduction, noise, and the push. I also have the three inside me. What I could do with these in the real world-

I grin. My brain seems to be starting again. Don't think about after. After this hour and a little, things will be done, one way or the other. That's it. I've practiced the most with the pusher Talent. It can throw her back if I need and help me land if I have the mass-reduction or ghost Talent. Let's do the elf Talent. It's been extremely useful. I can jump, land, and run with it. It'll probably also help with the sword. Easy decisions.

I shrug off my bag and sit down on the ground. The adrenaline slows down, letting me catch my breath. I feel my muscles start to stiffen. I'll have to stretch before the fight. Still, rest. I unzip the bag and pull out the wooden box and swap out my Talents.

I stare down into the swirling colors. I have no clue for the last slot. Probably need some more defense, something to keep her from outright killing me. I look up at Agot. They're sitting cross-legged with their eyes closed, breathing deep.

"Hey, Agot."

"They open their eyes," Yes Pat.

"What do you think about this fight?" I ask.

"I'm not sure what you mean." Their eyes bore into me.

“I- I don’t know what to do, what to prepare for,” I say.

They shift forward, now in a kneeling pose. “You’ve fought more ghosts than me. However, I suppose this is a different kind of threat.”

I nod, “She’s different. My grandmother’s ghost can think. It’s warped, but it can probably react to whatever I do.”

“That will likely be the greatest challenge for you,” they say, “What Talents have you already selected?”

“I’m thinking of my pushing and your sensing and agility Talents. I can probably hold one more.”

They look down into the box. “The healing Talent is too slow for use in combat.” What else is there?”

“There’s a Talent that makes a loud sound. Not very useful with the sensing. It’s either mass reduction or phasing.”

“Phasing from the ghosts?” They ask.

“Yeah.”

“That’s a risky bet. Though, it may work well for you. You’ve employed it effectively already.”

“I-I suppose.” I reply.

“Let’s take the rest of the time to get you ready. You’ve been exerting yourself a lot today. There are a few things you can do for the sword,” they say.

I nod.

We spend the rest of the time stretching and getting me ready for the fight. In the last ten minutes, I tap my pocket, breathing hard and mentally preparing to use something.

Welp, this is over. Time to face Grandma.

Chapter 26

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I leave my backpack with Agot as I step up to the fully opaque ghost that looks like my grandmother, my *dead* grandmother. She smiles at me, her face lighting up like those times at family reunions and visits. This isn't her anymore. I understand that. She's gone, and I have to just accept that.

"Are you ready Pattycakes?" She asks.

"Yes," I say, "Thank you grandma."

"Oh, it wasn't any bother," she says waving it off, "I'm glad you have a friend here to support you."

I nod.

"Can we just get this over with?" I ask.

"Okay," her smile fades, "You are a wonderful person, and I really hope that you understand what's right after this is over."

I keep silent and breathe. In, out. In, out. No questions. I already know my first move. Just let this go. She's dead, and you're putting her to rest.

I point my sword at her and put my right foot back, sitting down into the stance Agot showed me.

The ghost hops into the air and starts phasing, floating lightly into the ground. Her feet go in just a little bit, and she turns solid. The ghost of grandma rockets toward me.

I breathe. In, out. Timing. Same thing as always. I extend my sword. She slides through it. Her palm reaches out toward me, barely into me. I push with the Talent and rip my sword out.

Nothing. The ghost is still phasing, bringing her feet up as she flies back. Then she turns opaque.

“Not going to work on me honey,” the ghost grins, “I know your trick.”

I grimace. Okay, fine. I take my hand off the blade and unzip my pocket. I grab the gun. In, out. In, out. In, out. I take it out and point it at her.

The ghost doesn't react, just stands there. “Feel free to take the shot.”

I do. I pull on the trigger, gripping the handle hard. The entire gun rockets up. My body jerks back, flinching at it. I drop the gun as the vibrations shudder up my arm.

The ghost flies forward, transparent now. I bring the sword forward again. She's right there. I push, but the ghost turns opaque. The sword slides through its side, and I rip it out, only slicing a little and tearing her clothes. She grabs my face and steps forward, throwing me to the ground. I land hard and drop the sword. I can't even focus to see or hear anything. I just push. Push with the Talent everywhere, using up a lot, while I just lay there, regaining my bearings.

I reopen my eyes and look around.

Grandma's ghost stands over me fully opaque, arms crossed as if she's waiting.

"What!" I yell.

"I expected more from you," she replies, "It's a shame, but I suppose that you're not that kind of person. Do you have anything else?"

Maybe. In, out. I stare at the ghost of my grandmother. In, out. Shit. This'll hurt, but maybe. I shift up onto my elbows. Scraping up dirt. Just do it.

I start phasing through the world, everything becoming dark to me, just little flecks of what it was. I feel my body go through the ground, just a little bit. I turn it off and launch forward. Part of me scrapes off as I'm shunted out of the earth. The lower half of my body launches up, warmth like a scrape pervades everything that was in the ground. I feel a heavy smack as my steel toed combat boots strike at the ghost. The agility Talent flowing through me, I look up at the ground and stretch my hands down. They hit touch the ground. My shoulders screaming with the effort as I pull myself to a runner's stance. Still, I slam my knees on the ground - hard. Shit. That hurts. Need that healing afterward. I just breathe and look up to what was my grandmother.

Her jaw is gone, along with her nose and most of her cheek. The ghost is now like a zombie but dripping a black mist instead of blood and flesh. It falls back but catches itself. It looks down at me again, the black mist drizzling from its face.

A guttural growl emerges from its throat. It rushes toward me. A red light emerging from its hand. I try to roll to the side, but it kicks me, a tear tracing the movement. The red glow burrows into my eyes, the red drills itself into my soul. It grabs my face and throws me through.

I land on my hands and knees again, this time, not hitting as hard. My lungs breathe in the gritty, dust-tasting air, forcing me into a coughing fit. My eyes tear up, surrounded with this red painful light, almost what a dentist's light feels like, along with the ominous feeling of someone putting something where it shouldn't go and how much it'll hurt when something goes wrong. I hold my breath and shut my eyes, against it. Shit! I crawl forward as quick as possible, until I hear something stepping beside me, the gravelly ground scraping under the footsteps. Shit! Breathe!

In, out.

The air smells noxious. I resist the tickle at the back of my mouth, the urge to cough again. Shit. Just. Hold it in. You're in a fight. Figure out how to win.

A firm grip grasps the back of my shirt and yanks me back.

I fall with the grip, stumbling as the force pulls me off-balance and onto my ass. I wave my arms and hit a flabby piece of flesh. I just wind up and slam at it.

And my arm hits empty air. Shit! I just need space. I need to get out.

I get onto my knees and just sit there. Okay, can't see. In, out. Breathe, even if it sucks. Just breathe. In, out. I cough, ruining the rhythm. Ignore it! Think. Can't see. She probably knows this. You can hear. So, listen. I let myself just sit and listen. I barely breathe, only taking in enough so I don't cough. I channel the sensing Talent into my ears. There's almost no noise, just little shifts in the gravel as I move, little by little.

Nothing. Okay, probably not around, or standing still, just trying to hide while it assesses what I'm doing. Maybe it just left me here? Shit, No. Just figure it out.

I open my eyes just a little. That red light still hurts but a little less. The tears make everything blurry. I glance around. And see a blotch of natural light, behind the ghost, that blur of white in the heated red.

Fuck. I close my eyes. I can't deal with this shit as is. I just have to get out. That ghost will be in the way, but I have to figure it out. In, out. In, out. Breathe.

Gravel shifts.

The ghost must have jumped. Shit. Okay. Just look. I try to open my eyes again. It's not working. Shit. It just hurts so much! Shit. It's going to try to phase again. How.

I try to push in the direction I heard the gravel.

I don't get any feedback. Shit. Just. Fuck. How do I get that to work?

Okay, I have phasing, agility and pushing. I should just be able to do that jump thing to avoid it. Let's just do it. I can't breathe for timing. So, I'll just guess. I take in one last breath and hold it.

I run two steps and jump, phasing mid-air. Instead of becoming dark, the world lights up, everything becomes bright with the little dots of whiteness all around. I can see perfectly, even with my eyes closed, but one of those white lights is heading straight toward me, a perfect outline of my Grandmother's ghost.

Okay, three, two one.

I swing my leg at the outline of the ghost's face, kicking it just as it gets into reach. I feel something, there's no sound, it's completely quiet, but I feel hard bone snap against my boot. Fuck that's the shit I needed in my life.

I phase back, the agility talent helping me land standing, and breathe out. I open my eyes for a second. There's a crumpled mass on the ground, and I run straight toward the light that doesn't hurt.

I fall, as a hand grips onto my ankle. Shit. That makes me take another breath of the noxious fumes. I cough hard as I turn over, and open my eyes again. That messed up face with horrid eyes glares at me. It's leaking black smoke as well as white mist. I take in one more breath and hold it, forcing myself to ignore the convulsions in my chest as my lungs try to expel the toxic air.

I kick at the arm, slamming my boot into its wrist. The fucking arm comes off, leaving the hand attached to my leg. More mist leaks and leaks, sticking onto and absorbing into my skin. However, the black smoke just sits there on the ground. I blink my eyes again, letting the tears fall.

Then, the agility Talent runs out. I feel my body slowing down, feeling clumsy.

I touch the black smoke. It feels wrong, it heats up as it touches my skin, burns inside my veins and I just hate it. Fuck.

Wait, this might be it.

I channel the dark mist Talent from Grandma and rip my arm forward. It glows an angry red, and the entire world warps around it, tearing open to the light.

I reach my hand through the filmy connection, grab a chunk of grass, and yank, pulling myself forward. I feel the blades pull and snap out of the ground into my hand. I drag myself forward, the ghostly hand still locked onto my ankle.

Then, another hand grabs mine. I hold onto it, and it pulls me through, dragging me through the portal I made, up and into a light that doesn't burn.

I'm pulled forward. I feel Agot's thin hands yank my arm. They pour something on my body. Something else gets sucked out. My everything is aching. Then, it starts feeling better, the healing Talent taking hold inside my body.

The healing Talent! My mind comes into sharp focus. Grandpa! Shit! I need to save him! I struggle my way onto my knees, then my feet, ignoring the voice. Saving my grandfather consumes my mind.

“I need to get to him, save my grandpa with the healing Talent.”

I stumble forward, then feel a hand on my back.

“I can help. Though, it will cost you,” Agot. Fuck, Of course. One track mind.

“Yeah, please,” I reply.

“Okay,” and I feel them pull me up onto their back.

The run goes quick, I’m not sure if I’m conscious through the whole of it. Probably not. Still. When I feel myself put down on the ground, I feel mentally refreshed, but thirsty.

We’re by the house. There’re police swarming around the place.

“Thank you Agot.”

They are standing up, stretching their legs, and breathing hard. “That’ll be another two Talent combinations, and this will be three more.” They hand me a small glass bottle with a thick white liquid.

“Healing Talent?” I ask

“Yeah, return the bottle, though,” Agot says, “That costs extra.”

“Thank you so much,” I say and give them a hug.

“This will be a wonderful business relationship we have,” Agot pats my back. (Their other hand is on my hip!!! No, stop. Grandfather.)

I let go and run toward the police, jamming the bottle in my cargo pocket.

“The hand,” Agot calls.

I look down at my ankle. The hand is still there, leaking black. I stare down at it, the last remains of that lovely woman, the last remains of what she became. I feel sick. I reach down slowly and mutter a “Thanks” to Agot as I peel it off. And stuff it into my pocket. I can’t throw it away right now. I’ll just keep it.

I run toward the police.

“Help!” I scream.

Their heads swivel toward me.

“I’m Patricia, the one who made the call. Someone attacked my Grandpa and tried to kidnap me! I was able to kick them and get away. Please. Is Grandpa okay?”

The officer closest to me holds his hand out and holds his other hand on his radio. “Hey, we have a girl claiming to be the granddaughter. Can someone come to verify.” Then, he looks to me. “Give us a minute. I don’t know about your grandpa, but we’ll take you to him as soon as we can.”

I show them my drivers’ license from my bag, and they verify that it’s me and ask me a bunch of questions, then take me to Grandpa. In the car ride, I turn my phone back on and text Firio, letting him know that I’m okay.

Grandpa’s on a medical bed, hooked up to tubes with one of those monitors. The doctor who brought me in says that he’s stable for now, but they don’t know if he’ll pull through.

“Okay, thanks,” I say, “Can I have a minute.”

He looks down at me and slowly nods. “Only a short time. We want to keep an eye on him.”

“Sure.”

I take out the little bottle from my pocket. They haven’t searched me or anything. Just let me go here, after making sure I am who I said I was. I take his hand and pour the liquid onto it. It absorbs into his skin, and I can feel the energy flow inside of him.

He squeezes my hand.

Yeah, things will be okay.

Epilogue

Gramps and I are in the car. He has the tape going. Its Frank Sinatra, of course, the “Trilogy” posthumous album. Right now, its “Street of Dreams” and Gramps is shamelessly singing along as we ride toward the Warehouse Club, the venue for tonight’s gig. He stops on the street in front of the Club. The sun shines on the plain white façade with only a blank LCD display and a garage door on the front of the renovated storage warehouse. The area feels so empty as it waits for its transformation. “My Shining Hour” begins right as Gramps stops the radio.

“All righty, where do you want me to go from here?” He asks, looking down at me. He’s wearing rectangular wire-rimmed glasses and a plaid shirt with suspenders. He has that goofy smile plastered on his face again.

“Oh,” I say, “feel free to pull around to the back. The event manager said that we should be able to get in there.”

“Will do!” Gramps says, “Goodness, my granddaughter’s a Rockstar! I don’t know if I can ever get used to that.”

I exhale, LOL. “Yeah,” I say, “It’s hard for me too sometimes, but I’m enjoying the ride.” I don’t correct him to say I play metal, not rock.

The car comes around to the loading dock in the back, and I notice that someone's already standing outside. Gramps stops the car, playing with the stick shifter, and pulling the E-break.

"Hey, gramps," I say.

"Yeah, Pat?"

"There's one thing I didn't tell you about this person," I say, "About Agot."

"Oh," he raises his eyebrow, "You're talking about him being your elf boyfriend, right?"

"Wait! What?" I say.

His smile widens. "Hahaha, you'll have to do better than that to get anything past me!"

"I- I mean" I stutter, "Yeah, I've been seeing them for a month now. So..."

"Oh, sorry. Pronouns, right, *they are your elf partner*. Did I do it right?"

Gramps asks.

"Oh!" I say, "Yeah, thank you."

"Is there something else? Ha, don't worry," He says, "If you got knocked up, I can take them. I still got my sword in the back. Still banged up from you using it, but sharp as ever!"

"NO!" I yell, "Nothing like that! It's just... They're not my age."

"Oh, thank goodness!" Gramps says. "I know what I was like at your age, and that's a good thing. How much older?"

I spit out the words before I can have second thoughts, “about a hundred and twenty years.”

I look up at Gramps. He meets my gaze. He looks terrified. “Oh” is all he says and looks forward. “Well, I suppose this will be a learning experience for us both.”

“Thank you, Gramps,” I say. “For being understanding and driving me here.”

That snaps him out of it. “Oh, of course! I’m happy to help!” he grins, “Actually, you just reminded me of something.” He reaches under his seat and pulls out a long rectangular object covered in messy Christmas wrapping paper. “Something to celebrate your first show back in town,” he says.

I look at it and tear open the bottom of the paper. A pair of shiny white drumsticks slide out. “Wow,” I say. I test their weight in my hands, “These are awesome! Thank you!” I say.

“I’m glad you enjoy them,” he says, “One of my friends at the VA’s said you might like them.”

I squint at him, “Is this the same friend who recommended the boots.”

“Maybe”

“I need to meet this person,” I say.

Gramps chuckles, “Yeah, you probably should. He’s a fun person! I think you’d enjoy him!”

I grin and open the car door, grabbing my water bottle in the central console, and hopping out the car.

Agot's there, on top of the concrete platform by back entrance. They're dressed in a dark green tunic that exposes their painted midriff and split skirt, imbedded with metal chains and gemstones.

"Oh," I say blushing, "Hi Agot."

They nod at me, "Hello! It's wonderful to see you." They gesture to Gramps. "Is this the Grandfather I heard so much about?" They stare straight into my eyes, "With the Loose Leaf?"

I clutch my water bottle, filled with the stuff. "Yes, yes, he is, and you're not getting mine!"

Their lips spread into a predatory smile, "Don't worry. I have a new source now!"

Gramps is out of the car at this point, using his new cane to support himself. "Hello Agot!" he says, waving.

"Hello," Agot says, in heavily accented English.

"Oh," I say and dig into the backpack for Grandma's telegraph. I pull it out and hand it to Gramps. "Here's the telegraph. Just say that you want to talk to Agot and tap out the pangram," I say. "That will translate your conversation."

Gramps nods and starts tapping. I look up at Agot.

"This should be good practice for your Elvish," they say.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm working on it," I reply.

“It’s a,-” they begin in English and swap over to Elvish, and I lose the rest of the sentence. I look over to Gramps and say, “All right, they’re all yours. I’ll go get things set up inside.”

Gramps nods, “Have fun!”

I hop up to Agot and tell them in the melodic Elvish “I’ll be inside. Good Luck.” I give them a quick hug, and head in.

My eyes struggle to adjust to the darkness inside. I make my way toward the stage, where everything should be set up from yesterday, and I notice a short, sinewy guy on the stage. He’s, bent down over his laptop, facing away from me, surrounded by a mess of cords. I almost don’t recognize Firio in the lighting, except for the bass already strapped to him. His hair is grown out into that new boyish swoosh he’s been playing with.

“Heya!” I call out.

He jumps and looks over “Pat!” he takes off the bass and untangles himself from the cords. He walks over, and I get a good look at his costume.

Firio’s wearing torn jeans with a spiky leather belt. He’s barefoot with neatly trimmed toenails. His usual contacts are replaced with prescription glasses that seem to change shading in and out of the light. He wears an unbuttoned denim vest.

And no shirt.

“Woah,” I say, “This is new!”

He looks down, and smiles. “Yeah,” he says, “Everything’s sorted with my chest. So, I figured I might as well try showing it off! And with the band’s restart changing everything. I think I’ll have fun with my image, you know, try things out!”

“Yeah,” I say, looking down at my boots. “I suppose that’ll be a cool thing to try. For now, I think I’ll keep to my style as is.”

“Cool by me!” Firio gives me a toothy grin. “You don’t have to change your look, even if we’re ‘Newborns.’” He says, pointing to our new logo, hanging over the stage. “You’re valid.”

“Yeah,” I say, “Thanks.”

“Now let’s get everything ready!” Firio turns back and heads toward his computer, “We want our debut to be the best it can!”

I smile, “Will do!”

It’s all dark and quiet. My heart thumps hard, I grip the hard painted wood in both my hands. Then, I tap my foot down, hitting the pedal for the kick. Thump. Thump. Thump. Thump. The stage lights come on, and Firio stands in front of me, steps on one of the foot pedals in front of him. A distorted hurdy gurdy synth belts out a heavy tune, almost sounding like an electric guitar. I let out a scream straight into the mic in front of my face, and Firio slams on his bass, letting his own voice rip out into the song, screaming, “The Trials are Over

We're in the same venue as before, the familiar air of a dark warehouse filled with people only a few years older than me, screaming out. It smells like sweat and beer already, and we just started the first song of our lineup.

My drumming lines up into a familiar style, a familiar rhythm, complicated by the multiple layers and different tones, Morse code. Most of the audience is filled with movement, but there's a little still section, almost a line at the edges of people who stand still, some of them holding paper and pencil, noting down my drum rhythm. I recognize them, newer fans, coming because of our change in sound, and specifically the ever changing morse messages I hide into the solos. Tonight, I have a nice little bit that I came up with about a particular someone. I look to my left. Agot stands there, grinning, nodding their head to the rhythm, They look like they'd fit in with Roasted Lobster's more out-there fans. Though, I suppose that would apply anyway.

I turn my attention back to the song and Firio looks back to me, and nods. I nod back and they kick another pedal and everything cuts out, letting me rip into the first of many solos for the night.

--. . / / .- / ... - .-. .- .- .-. .-. / .. -. / - / -. .-. .- .-. .-. .-. THERE IS A
STRANGER IN THE CROWD

.- / -. .-. .-. .-. .-. / --- ..-. / - .- .-. .-. .- ... A DEALER OF TALENTS

.. / .- -- / .. -. / -. . -... - / --- .- .-. .-. .-. .-. .-. .-. I AM IN DEBT
HONORBOUND

My solo ends, launching into Firio's heavy slap base, forefronting his own sound. We pass back and forth, using this song as the introduction to the night, building hype for the rest of the set.

I grin. This is what I was looking for in my life. Finally.

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