

The Cogs of Gods



REBIRTH
★
REVOLUTION

Anemyre

Rebirth & Revolution (SAMPLE)

Anemyre

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REBIRTH

As I stood in line, waiting patiently for the moment in which the doors would be opened and our lives would change once more, a thought entered my mind.

How long have I been here?

It wasn't exactly a profound thought, but it caused something to stir inside of me. It wasn't so much that I didn't know how long I'd been here, a bit over a year, but it seemed as though the question was really trying to get at something else. I asked myself *how long*, and yet the real question was...

Why was I still here?

In my day to day life, I tried to keep my head clean of these thoughts. The issue with thinking too much is that it makes you distracted, and in this life of mine I couldn't afford the luxury of not being alert. This wasn't to say that there weren't moments of rest, however, I've never felt capable of completely letting my guard down while I've been here.

The full name of this strange place is *The Hallowed Academy for Champions of the Gods*, it's usually just referred to as *The Academy* given that it's much shorter and, to my knowledge, the only such institution that exists. Even then, I wouldn't exactly consider this an institution of learning like those that existed in the days before the world was damned. Although we're still taught things here, the end goal seems to be turning us into some sort of soldier. At least, that's what I've gathered in my time here.

It's hard to make sense of the world around me when I can hardly even make sense of who I am in the first place. My memory seems to have been tampered with as nothing prior to my first day here exists in my mind. Despite not speaking to them much, I've realized it's likely the same for every other underling here as well. We didn't seem to have joined willingly, like some of the older members, we simply appeared here one day.

On the night I awoke here, it was almost as if I'd opened my eyes and simply began existing. Unlike the drowsiness of waking up from sleep, my consciousness instantly activated while I was wide awake. In a single moment, I'd come into a new life surrounded by others close in age to me. At the time I would have been around thirteen years old, if the Academy's listing of my age can be believed.

The other children ranged from around ten years old to mid-teens at most. We had been placed in a large wooden building that was rotting and leaking water from above. Outside, I could hear the rain beating against the roof and the cold wind seemed to easily make its way through the cracks in the walls. We were all shivering, trying to stay warm when all we had on were rags that were almost loose enough to fall off our bodies.

As I looked at the person next to me, I noticed that he simply stared straight ahead. Despite me tapping his shoulder and waving my hand in front of him, nothing seemed to snap him from this strange trance. Looking behind, I was horrified to see that the others were in a similar state as well. Feeling unsafe around these people, I backed myself into a corner of the room and watched as they sat there, shivering but not reacting in any other way. It was as if they were only present in a physical sense.

Despite my desperate wishing that this was all just a strange dream, I knew in my soul that this was my new reality. No amount of pinching my skin or closing my eyes in the hopes that I would awaken somewhere else would change a thing. In that moment of desperation, as I racked my mind for any idea as to where I was, it dawned on me that I had no idea who *I* even was. It seemed ridiculous at first, but I quickly realized that I couldn't recall a single thing from the past. Even my own name was lost to me.

In the depths of my despair, the door of the building suddenly swung open, nearly hitting me and only being stopped by the wall beside me. Stuck in the corner of the building, I could only watch through a small crack in the door as a man in a strange uniform walked in. Even though he was completely soaked, the man showed no signs of being bothered by the cold. Instead, he walked straight to the middle of the room and loudly clapped his hands twice before yelling at the children in a clear voice.

“Awaken to your new lives! Sons and daughters of the Gods, to your feet!”

As if broken from their spell, the children suddenly woke up and began looking around, obviously confused by their current situation. Seeing that the children weren't obeying his command, the man clapped once more and screamed at the children.

“I said, TO YOUR FEET!”

There was a slight delay before a small group of them hesitantly rose. The rest watched for a moment and then followed soon after. The man seemed to take note of this and began pulling the most responsive children out of the group harshly by their arms. Once they were separated, he marched that group out of the room and closed the door, leaving the rest behind. In his absence, a voice spoke up.

“Where are we?”

Nobody answered him. I wasn't sure if it was out of fear or simply because they lacked the ability to respond. Whatever the case, it was obvious that we were not free to leave. Knowing the location of our imprisonment would change little about our current situation anyway.

Being in the corner of the room, nobody seemed to pay me any mind. Perhaps they were too concerned for their own well-being to care about the strange boy all by himself. Just as I was about to move back into place alongside them, in order to avoid looking suspicious, the door suddenly trapped me once again. A different man came in and instructed the others to follow him. One by one, they were led out of the room and joined by other men waiting outside. Wherever they were going, I doubt they'd be treated much better.

At no point did anyone notice me, and it was due to my lack of presence that I was left behind, all alone, in that building. Far off in the distance, I could hear men yelling but I couldn't make out what was being said or if they were even the same ones as before. Still freezing from the cold and dampness of the building, I struggled to think of what to do next. I couldn't stay here for various reasons, the most pressing being the fact that I was slowly losing feeling in my fingers and toes. This harsh cold was going to kill me if I didn't find a way to warm myself. My only option was to try and find whatever shelter these strange men had come from.

I left the corner of the room and waited by the entrance, listening for any movement. Hearing nothing but the sound of my own breathing, I slowly opened the door which to my dismay groaned quite loudly. Hearing the sound of footsteps approaching, I ran into the nearby woods and hid in the first bush I saw. To my shock, it was covered in thorns which dug into my skin, burning and making the pain of the cold even worse by drawing blood. I desperately wanted to leave this cover, but the slightest movement could alert them with how close I was to the building. There I waited, as the rain continued to pelt me with freezing water.

When the group of men came into view, I noticed that they all had on the same strange uniform. It was dyed in a dark color which made them blend into the night, however, they also had a large white circle-ish symbol on their face and back that somewhat allowed me to keep track of them. I steadied my breathing as I watched one go into the building while the others scanned the nearby area. As one of them came closer, I thought for sure I would be found, but just as he was getting near, the sound of the groaning door caught his attention. One of the other men was exiting the building after having searched for any stragglers. Seeing that it was empty, he called the others over to him.

"Building's empty as far as I see. Looks like *Forty-Three* left the door open. Must have been the wind pushing it around."

As I stared at them, I noticed that the size difference between them was rather large. At the time, I had no concept of how our races were differentiated in such a drastic way. In my mind, it was just another oddity to add onto my list of current concerns.

Not seeing a reason to continue investigating, the men headed back in the same direction they had come from. With them gone, I was able to finally leave my cover. It was fortunate that the children had left so many footprints all over the ground to cover my own. Perhaps if the men had been more careful, they would have noticed mine veered off the path, but their complacency had saved me. How many times have they done this that they've grown lazy in their work?

When I was certain they'd left the area, I made my way towards the direction where I'd heard the rest of my group leave earlier. I didn't exactly care about where they'd been taken, I simply had no other idea of where to go. As far as I could tell, the men who had inspected the door had headed this way as well. I couldn't spot any other paths and heading straight into the dark wilderness would more than likely end with me freezing to death.

Taking the only sensible option, I began after them, careful to slow my pace to keep some distance. Along the way, I could occasionally make out the small footprints of the barefooted children, which contrasted heavily against the bootprints of the adults that were leading them. Most of them had become an unrecognizable mush of disheveled dirt that reminded me of ripples in a pool of water. I suppose this comparison came to mind due to the various puddles that the rain had formed along the path. Every time my foot landed in one, I could feel the small amount of heat remaining in my body being sapped out.

Although getting off the muddy path would mean less puddles, the rocks and sticks of the surrounding forest digging into the soles of my feet hurt enough to dissuade me. As such, I slowly plodded along until the cold started to overwhelm me and increase my desperation for warmth. Quickening my pace, I didn't care anymore if I ran into those men from before. The rain was increasing in intensity and I felt as though I were going to die soon without shelter. With the thunder and rain masking the noise I made, I soon broke into a sprint.

As I ran, useless thoughts began to occupy my mind. I tried to remain focused, but ignoring them only worsened their intrusions. My heavy breathing and the frantic beating

of my heart became the background of my self-interrogation.

Why do I know the names of things like “thunder” and “water” while not even knowing my own name?

How is it that I’m able to picture these words in my head and even spell out their letters?

Have I truly lost my memory or have the perfect parts been plucked out to turn me into this confused mess?

The storm, the questions, my fatigue and coldness, it was all too much. Just as I felt on the verge of collapse, a man’s voice snapped me back to attention. He was some ways away, but I could almost recognize it as the voice of the man who’d taken the majority of the group earlier. Carefully making my way closer to where the sound came from, I began to see the glowing light of a fire in the distance. It was incredibly tempting to rush over towards it, but instead I gritted my teeth and headed into the woods nearby to get closer without being seen.

As expected, rocks and twigs dug into my feet, but eventually I came upon a shocking scene that made me forget about my discomfort. Inside a forest clearing, there was a giant stack of burning wood that was encircled by various uniformed men. With the light of the fire, I could finally make out what the strange white symbol was; it was a large white cog. I wasn’t sure what it represented, but it mattered little to me at the moment. My most pressing concern remained the same as before, warmth.

By now, I could hear the voice of the man from earlier fairly clearly as he yelled, but it wasn’t until I saw the shadows that the fire created that I grasped what was truly happening.

“Keep running, you runts! You don’t stop when you’re tired! You stop when you’re ordered to!”

The man was forcing the children to run laps in the muddy field. Over and over they ran in circles until some would fall from exhaustion. Once one of them fell, a man would come over and try to yank the child back onto their feet. If they refused, then the men would begin beating them with what appeared to be a bunch of reeds tied together

into a clatter of sticks. As they beat the children, they would scream at them to continue running, but some of them simply couldn't get up anymore. One of the boys tried to escape this torment, but he was quickly caught and thrown onto the floor. His head was then forced into the mud until he nearly suffocated. Once the man was satisfied with his torture of the child, he forced him back to his feet and struck him with his open palm until the boy began running once more.

I was horrified at the sadistic violence I was witnessing. They continued to run out of sheer fear despite the obvious limps many of them sported from their raggedness and potential injuries. As the group began to slow down, the hooded men ramped up their cruelty. They walked towards the fire, grabbing these large metal sticks, whose tips had been resting in the flames, and began waving them in a threatening manner. Once the initial fear wore off and fatigue took over, the men made good on their threats and began jabbing the tips of the burning rods into their victims' arms and rears. They even began to chase them around as if it were some sort of sick game.

Despite the terrible punishments in store, several more children fell to the ground as their bodies gave out. They remained still, even as the men kicked and burned them. I had no way of being sure, but they seemed to be dead. Their corpses were left wherever they had fallen and the others that were still alive were forced to jump over them or risk tripping. As the weather became worse, more began to fall, but whatever sadistic goal they had seemed to be fulfilled as they ended their torture.

"That's it! No more! Those of you that are still standing, follow me. If any of you on the ground are still alive, then you'll be taken inside as well. May those that have fallen on this day have their sins forgiven by the Gods, and may they find rest in their loving embrace. Only the strong are fit to become their Champions. Take pride that you will soon become tools of our Masters of masters."

With his speech over, he took those that still stood along with him while the other men went to check on each fallen child. Seeing this as an opportunity, I began rubbing mud all over my body and waited until I had a chance to sneak onto the field. The nearest

man to me was checking one of the bodies when I proceeded to lie down behind him. Upon turning around, he nearly tripped over me.

Confused, he forcefully prodded the space between my chest and stomach which forced a groan out of me. Seeing that I was still alive, he hoisted me up by the arm and slung me over his shoulder, carrying me over to another hooded figure who seemed to be collecting us onto a cart. Due to my supposed grave condition, I was placed onto it along with various other children who seemed to genuinely be on the verge of death. I noticed as we were being hauled away that we were heading in a different direction than those who'd followed that man. Immediately, I wondered if I'd made a mistake.

I don't remember much after, as most of the ride was spent shivering in darkness, however, we did eventually arrive in what I now know as the *infirmary*. This was where we received our first ever taste of kindness since awakening. Unlike the men from before, the people here were gentle with us.

Upon arriving, they opened the large doors that led outside and wheeled us in. The men who'd pulled the cart then proceeded to lay us out on the ground. Despite the hard, cold stone floor, the heat from the lit torches and protection from the elements provided the warmth I so desperately needed. Slowly, the feeling came back to my fingers and toes. It was painful at first, but in this instance, I preferred feeling pain over nothing.

After the men had finished unloading the cart, they exited the building with it, leaving us in the care of these new strangers. Contrary to the men who had left us here, the people who ran the infirmary were almost entirely covered in white. I watched as they carefully picked up person after person from the ground. Eventually, it was my turn, and I felt as two of these people grabbed me by the arms and legs. I was then taken inside of a room filled with beds and stripped of the drenched rags that covered me. These strangers proceeded to wipe my body dry before dressing me in new undergarments, pants, and the same uniform jacket the men had on which featured a white cog on its back.

During the process, I heard their voices and realized they were women. I became incredibly embarrassed, even though I wasn't sure why. Although it was an awkward

experience, the relief I felt in being dry and warm quickly made me forget the discomfort of it all. Soon after, they laid me down on a bed that, although a bit lumpy, felt indescribably wonderful in that moment. The second I was given a blanket, I almost immediately fell asleep.

This building is unique and precious to all of us who live here, not just because it is a place of healing, but because it's the one place where you can indulge in the luxury of safety and comfort. As long as we remain under their care, our rest is never disturbed. That night, I slept so deeply that I didn't wake a single time until the following afternoon. I should have felt rested, but instead I found myself feeling very ill. In fact, everyone who was still in the infirmary appeared to be just as ill, if not worse. Initially, I was scared of what would happen now that I was too weak to protect myself, however, the following days of care did away with most of my negative thoughts.

I didn't speak much to these *Medics*, which is what they called themselves, but they seemed to be genuinely caring individuals. Not only did they bring me food while I was in bed, they checked on me regularly to make sure I was well, and brought me bitter medicine that made the aches in my body almost disappear. A very sweet one even brought me an extra pillow so I could sit up more comfortably. The contrast in our treatment between these women and the men from earlier was something I had trouble understanding. How could both of these groups belong to the same organization?

With the help of their care, I was made healthy within the span of only five days. Before I left, I was given an extra set of footwraps and undergarments, along with a strange hood that had the same face covering they all wore. I was told to wear the hood and to never remove it unless instructed to. At the time, I hadn't realized that it would be the last time anyone would see my face.

As I was leaving the infirmary, another Medic told me to go to a place called the *White Chapel* which she said I would recognize by sight alone. When I initially stepped outside of the infirmary, I was worried I'd be lost considering there were three paths leading here, which meant I had two chances to head in the wrong direction. As I observed my surroundings though I found that the woman's simple instructions were

actually appropriate given that you could easily see a white spire off in the distance. Since this was in the direction of the middle path, I followed it to see if this was truly the White Chapel the woman had spoken of.

On my way there, I was surprised to see just how large this place was. Although I was still ignorant as to the actual size of the land the Academy occupied, I was intrigued by how much dense forest there was between these buildings. It was as if this place had only recently begun to spread out.

Upon arriving at the White Chapel, I was immediately struck by the building's beauty. Unlike the infirmary, which looked like a dull gray block, this building seemed to be made of wood and a finely carved white stone. Perhaps it had simply been painted white, but the contrast between the building's solid color and its glass windows, which somehow resembled a painting, filled me with wonder.

How could glass be fractured into so many colors and put together to form these images?

Was it done piece by piece or was there a process to color such large sheets of glass?

As I stood outside, gawking at the building, I was caught off guard by a random old man that appeared behind me. Unlike the Medics, who's uniforms were similar to ours except in color, his was more like a robe. Its pure white fabric was made to look even brighter by the golden scripture that covered various parts of it. Symbols of skulls, cogs, and various other things decorated it. His face was covered, just like everyone else, and were it not for his voice and the slow way he walked, I would have never known his age. As he ordered me inside, I saw that his armband was different from the ones I'd seen thus far. While both of our armbands were black and featured a depiction of a cog on them, the Academy's symbol, his featured an image of an open book, and instead of it being sewn from white thread, it was golden like the scripture on his robe with his identification number right below. The strange thing about his identification number as well is that it wasn't in the regular script, rather in the ancient holy one. While mine was 719, his was merely V which indicated the number 5.

I had noticed that the Medics had a similar difference with their symbol and identification numbers not being like ours. Theirs was a pair of bandages wrapping the cog in an *X* pattern. While their numbers were still in regular script, it seemed odd that they shared the same three digit numbering as us. Did this mean we shared numbers with the only differentiating piece being the symbol? It didn't make sense, but there had to be a reason for it.

Entering the building, I noticed that there was an abundance of natural light. It was quite different from the windows in the infirmary which were basically just square shaped holes that had animal skins covering them. I assume this was due to the cold, but regardless light would make its way through the thin animal skin and give off a soft glow in the mornings. In stark contrast, the White Chapel was bathed in light that not only came in through the windows but seemed to radiate off the walls as well.

I didn't have much time to admire the inside as the old man hurried me along the whole time. He was a rather stern person, but luckily I wasn't the sole focus of his attention. There were other people my age sitting on benches near the front. It seemed that the low number of people was due to my time spent in the infirmary. Whether or not they were a part of my initial group, I didn't know. I was made to sit alongside them and soon after my *education* began.

Most of what we were taught was related to the Gods, despite the level of detail surrounding them being fairly limited. We were never told their names or what they even did, but we were simply told that there were twelve of them that had created the earth and all of humanity along with it. Everything we were taught from was stored in a large book they revered, *The Book of Life*. It mostly contained a collection of stories and histories related to the Gods and the time before the *War of Damnation*.

The War of Damnation, which goes by other such names as: *The Great War of Ending*, *The War of the Gods*, or simply, *The Final War*, was a war that engulfed the entirety of the world and brought about the ruin of every kingdom and empire that existed at the time. Most of humanity perished with only a few million still existing in the world today. As a consequence, we've regressed in technology, the arts, and even our basic

understanding of the world itself. Most people are illiterate and it seems that only those in high positions within society, and within the Academy, are able to read and write.

As such, my teachings were mostly in the form of sermons... although, I did realize quite early on that I was actually literate. This discovery first came about due to simple curiosity when I snuck a glance at the book the old man was reading from. What a surprise it was when I could understand the things written on the pages. Soon after, I realized he wasn't telling us everything. His teachings were either summaries of what he deemed important or what he'd been instructed to teach. It was difficult to read the text upside down, but my physical closeness to him allowed me to see the discrepancy in one of his lessons. He had left out the name of the old kingdom whose land we reside in now, *Austacia*. He also flipped through several pages without telling us what they covered. Whatever the reason for all of this was, I remained silent. Even if I was correct in calling this out, who knows what trouble I would have found myself in.

All I could do was try and glimpse information from his open book whenever he would walk around during lectures and leave it behind. Since the lectures were so long, some of the students would begin nodding off which caused a distraction. Although I never fell asleep, all of us got to see the punishment inflicted for doing so. Since he was rather frail, they were handled by the old man's assistants.

The old man seemed to be in charge of the teachings and prayer, but the physical aspects of running the chapel were left to his assistants. They were much younger and appeared more like soldiers based on their uniforms. Were it not for their armband, they would look almost identical to the Medics. Their armband bore a similarity to the old man's, but their identification numbers were in regular script and sewn from white thread instead. These helpers were called *Bearers of the Holy Book*, or simply *Book Bearers* for short. They did all of the physical labor required to keep the chapel functioning, watched over the buildings that had offerings in them, and helped with the holy rites. When anyone misbehaved, they would also be the ones to administer punishment so long as it was a minor infraction. More serious issues would likely be handled by guards or even an Overseer. In contrast to his helpers, the old man had a

much simpler title, *Chaplain*. It made sense given his position, however, there was apparently a much larger church that was inside of the Academy's main building. Unless we proved ourselves exemplary, we would never be allowed to step foot into that sacred site.

My curiosity was piqued but he never expanded on what exactly happened there. Then again, there were many things that were never expanded upon and the information was fairly random, such as the final family to rule this land being the Yandemir family. Nevertheless, I still found learning itself to be an enjoyable thing. Perhaps most of this was due to how passionate he was about teaching us, especially when it concerned the Gods. He spoke with such fervor and reverence for these beings that it almost made me believe that he'd witnessed their glory himself.

Even with my doubts due to the vagueness of what was taught to us regarding them, he still managed to instill within me a spark of belief that steadily grew with every lesson. As strange as it was, I could feel their presence every time we bowed our heads to pray. With every chant and hymn we sang, I began to feel as though the more irrational thing would be to believe nothing brought us into this world. If something were truly responsible for my existence, and my survival thus far, then I'd be a fool to dismiss it. Especially when their war nearly ending the world was more or less a fact. Still, I wish he'd told us more than he had.

Perhaps that was the point of this short education, to leave us hungry for more answers. We were promised more information, as well as higher rankings, should we prove ourselves dutiful and loyal. Although we were simply initiates for now, our main goal wasn't hidden from us, as it was a simple one, knowledge of the past. More specifically, the Academy wanted books. The world of the past was one of vast kingdoms, empires, and societies that in total numbered hundreds of millions in population at its peak. You'd think that books would be easy to find due to this, however, the destruction wrought by the war made such things scarce and useless to most people alive today. What little remains has to be traded for or scavenged. Our resources and physical position in the world also necessitates that we form partnerships

with neighboring civilizations in order to facilitate trade and mutual protection. Due to these circumstances, we often serve as mercenaries, guards, and all manner of roles that require able bodied people with combat capabilities. Although outsiders apparently treat us with suspicion, our skill and history of fair negotiations has led to relative peace. During one of our lectures, the Chaplain summarized the Academy's purpose as thus:

“Our buildings, our accomplishments, even our own flesh and bones are at the mercy of time. Knowledge was once passed down to us by our ancestors through word of mouth and then by books. Now, their wisdom threatens to fade away forever, often without us even knowing what has been lost. Every idea and advancement of mankind is the will of the Gods. To lose even the most mundane story or invention is a failure to our creators. You may wonder then, why would they bring about such destruction if their knowledge was holy, but to that I say why would they not? We were clearly unworthy of it in the past. We disobeyed and they punished us in turn. Our ancestors failed the Gods, but we shall not.

We are instruments for them to use and discard when they see fit. Think of it not as cruelty, but necessity. A builder wouldn't cry over a broken saw or a nail going missing, would they? Even should these bodies be broken, flesh torn and destroyed, our souls will forever remain and will one day return to their embrace. To us this world has been like this for over a century. For the Gods it is but a blink of the eye. Our interest in the past is not to rebuild the society of our ancestors. It is to build a society that is better in line with the will of the Gods so that we may live in peace with them once more. You may at times see remnants of civilizations once grand, or meet those who say blasphemous things of the Gods. To that, I say ignore them. Keep your mind free of such heresy and do not look at what came before with anything other than duty in mind. Instead, look forward to the eternal glory that can be achieved by serving the masters of humanity. We will usher in a world where nothing of the past can ever compare. It is our blessing and burden that we accept with open arms as we are simply cogs in the grand machine of the Gods' eternal plan.”

He had a way of speaking and phrasing things that made it hard to resist his message. It sounds insane in some ways, but it also makes sense for the world we were left with. After the war, the Gods distanced themselves from us mortals. All memories of who they were, what they did, or what they even looked like were erased from the minds of all humans. Supposedly, even our physical depictions of them were altered or destroyed to muddy their identities. As a consequence, it's not uncommon for outsiders to question their existence. Were it not for the Book of Life, then we would likely be just as lost as them.

Unlike every other physical thing in relation to the Gods, the original Book of Life was a parting gift from a God and thus remained unchanged. The version the old man had was a copy that was incomplete. Despite his high position among the Academy's scholars, only a select few are deemed worthy of seeing the original. Apparently, it explained everything, including who the Gods were and what had caused the war. Why the need for so much secrecy he never explained. All that we knew for now was that the original was still in the possession of the person who'd received it. By now, they would have been over one hundred years old, at the least if they were still somehow alive. Perhaps he'd meant it more along the lines of that person being buried with it? Whatever the case, at least our version told us enough to make sense of the world.

While these lectures only lasted two weeks, I still often find myself thinking back on them. Even though he discouraged it, I wanted to know more of the past. I wanted to know what the world was like before it was destroyed. I wanted to know why the Gods fought one another. I wanted to know more of the Gods themselves as well. If even for a moment, I wanted to speak to one like the people of the distant past had supposedly done, if for no other reason than to simply know they were still watching over us.

As the months progressed, we would only enter the White Chapel on the seventh day of the week and during the first day of every month. Our daily prayers would take place in the morning, when we ate in the mess hall, and right before bed, when we prayed to the Gods privately before going to sleep. We were never specifically told what to say during prayer, but generally we were supposed to thank them for everything good that

happened to us while also thanking them for the harsh lessons we had received. We could ask for their assistance and talk to them should we have troubles, but we were told to be respectful and to not bother them with petty issues. Aside from prayer, the first day of every month was when an offering was given to one of the twelve Gods. Being low ranked, however, meant that we never knew who we were honoring and mostly stayed quiet and bowed our heads with closed eyes.

If I'm being honest, I never looked forward to the ceremonies since they were usually boring. It would help if we had something to do during them, but at the very least I always ended up with a very peaceful feeling during the prayer session on such events. Maybe that's when they were the most present? It almost felt like falling asleep, but as far as I knew it never happened. Other priests aside from the Chaplain would come on such days to help with the event. While we were praying, they'd place their hands on our head and ask for our sins to be forgiven. There was an oddly soothing feeling when they touched us. Perhaps it had to do with the Gods blessing us? Whatever the reason, we'd always get the rest of the day to rest. It was a welcome reprieve from the horrors of the first few months of training.

My stay in the infirmary, and the instruction I received in the Chapel, seemed like happy memories compared to the hell I suffered in the following months. It's not as if I'm ever promised the next day, but I genuinely didn't know whether I would live or die during that time. As someone who was selected to be in an offensive role, our training was almost entirely focused on combat. As such, we were constantly being run through vigorous exercises and corporally punished if we couldn't keep up. At times we would be whipped with a long thin stick that somehow never broke despite the force behind it. Other times, the men training us would simply kick or push us down in order to dirty and humiliate us. Every day was a new form of torture and a terrifying unknown. The desperation I felt during that period of time perhaps turned me to the Gods more than anything. I can't say things have improved dramatically since then, but at least I don't fear for my life to the same extent.

“Suffering is the bitter medicine that the Gods give to make us stronger.”

The Chaplain said this to us one day after noticing that there were less of us than before. While those that oversaw us said that the ones who couldn't keep up would be transferred to supportive roles, I was never sure if that was the truth. I could see that happening for the recruits that had failed to keep up with our daily exercises, but when it came to combat training there were serious injuries. They trained us with wooden weapons at first, but quickly we were moved to the real things. The weapons weren't in the best condition but they were still lethal. Cuts and bruises were common, however, every once in a while there were terrible accidents. This was mostly due to the horrible mismatches when it came to our sparring opponents.

Something that I had learned early on is that the Academy was split between Sora and Toma. These were the two races that were common in these lands. The main difference between the two was that the Sora were smaller winged humans while the Toma were wingless but much larger and stronger. Although there were at least twice as many Sora as there were Toma, the two races were frequently paired together in order for us to learn how to properly fight one another.

Being a Sora myself, I hated this, even if it sounded like a reasonable idea on the surface. Our only chance to beat a Toma in single combat would be to target their joints or slice an artery. This of course wasn't allowed during training for obvious reasons. Since we never aimed to kill each other in these practice fights, we simply fought one another until someone yielded, the fight was ended by an instructor, or blood was drawn. I suppose we weren't expected to win these engagements, as *even* fights would often involve a Toma facing two or even three Sora.

From what we learned of wars in the past, Sora have always had a numbers advantage due to a larger population and the ability to fly which allowed them to spread around the world and reinforce their armies quickly. Their preferred weapons were often javelins, bows, spears, and other weapons that allowed them to quickly strike the Toma from safe distances. One-on-one fights were not how they were trained to fight. Instead they would use hit and run tactics which made them incredibly deadly to fight in open fields. Despite how strong the Toma were, they would often lose battles in open areas

as they'd be swarmed and overwhelmed by the constant attacks. Although a Toma could muster up a good defense if alert, Soras would often engage in surprise attacks as well. I'm sure there's much more to learn from pre-war battles, but due to how the world has changed it's not part of our doctrine.

Large wars are no longer possible so fighting often takes place in small skirmishes or even small group battles. My guess is that they wanted to prepare us to fight unequal odds as the number of us here in the Academy cannot compare to those of the outside world. Despite the brutality, this training was meant to keep us from death, however, on occasion the training itself was the cause of it.

Our weapons were never blunted in order for us to learn how to properly wield them and how to control our fear in losing positions. Despite the efforts taken to instill in us the necessity of not seriously injuring our opponent, accidents always happen. When such incidents occurred, the fight was immediately stopped in order to tend to any wounds. Cuts and shallow stab wounds were fairly common and I'm sure everyone had at least a handful of these injuries by the end of our training.

What struck me as odd from the beginning though was how comfortable I felt with these weapons. While some of the recruits struggled with properly holding swords or how to place their feet to ensure they're not off-balance, these things seemed instinctual to me. There were a few others that were equally skilled or better than I, but it made me wonder why this discrepancy was so.

Even with this advantage, I still found myself injured every now and then. The sudden feeling of having blood rush down an arm or leg always caught me off guard. In the moment you felt nothing, but soon after the searing pain would make you acknowledge the injury. It was as if your mind was having trouble catching up with your body. When such things occurred, the fight was immediately paused. The group would then gather around for the other part of our lessons, basic aid. If they were not watching, they were actively participating to learn how to do things such as stopping bleeding with pressure and bandages. You would also take turns with others in having them stitch your wound

and then stitching it yourself. The end result was always messy, but that's why we would be sent to the infirmary after for them to redo it properly.

For wounds that bled heavily, or were serious, it would depend on how life threatening it truly was. If the bleeding was manageable, then the instructor would step in and guide one of us in advanced aid while the rest watched. Our advanced aid would involve things such as creating a tourniquet, learning how to properly pack a stab wound, and on one occasion we even learned how to create a makeshift splint for a broken arm.

While these things had become quite normal to me, one of these occasions was very different. When it happened, I was already in the infirmary due to being the unfortunate subject of a demonstration on how to stitch a cut wound. I was nearly done having some poorly done stitches remade when a Sora came bursting through the door.

“Attention Medics! A recruit will be coming in shortly and needs immediate aid. He was run through with a spear to the stomach. He appears to be a Sora of around twelve years. I was ordered to assist should you need me.”

The Medics quickly dismissed the messenger and anything that wasn't urgent was stopped, including my stitches. As the Medics prepared various tools, as well as other items, the doors opened once more and two Tomas walked in carrying the boy on some sort of wooden frame with cloth stretched over it. They laid him down sideways on a table nearby. I could do nothing but stare as his masked face looked straight ahead at nothing in particular. The shaft of the spear was clearly sticking straight out of his stomach but he didn't seem to be bothered.

The metallic smell of blood began to fill the room as it rhythmically spurted forth from his wound. Although I was used to the sight of blood by now, I'd never seen it in such quantities before. It oozed out of his uniform and leaked all over the floor creating a puddle despite the Medics' attempts to staunch the flow. As more Medics surrounded him, they unmasked the boy and removed his uniform so that they could examine the wound. When they finished, they began debating on what to do; all the while, I couldn't help but stare at the boy's face, who stared back with a strange lack of emotion. I'd

expected them to begin trying to extract the weapon, but after some murmurs one of them brought forth a small bottle filled with a yellowish liquid. Although the Medics blocked my view, I could assume that they made him drink whatever it was.

Once they moved away, I saw a strange expression come onto the boy's face. It wasn't one of pain or fright, but rather a look of awe as if something were there that I couldn't see. A second later, fear flashed onto his face as he seemed to struggle drawing breath. He opened his mouth wide as he tried to gasp for air, but only a groan escaped instead. Immediately after, he began to foam at the mouth as a sickening gurgling filled the room.

When silence finally came, I felt ashamed at how relieved I was. Breaking the stillness of the room, one of the Medics grabbed a rag and wiped the white foam away from his lips. Right after, they laid a sheet over his body and resumed their duties as if nothing ever happened. The Medic that attended me continued where she'd left off and within a few minutes his body had been carried away to Gods know where.

From then on, I was much more cautious than ever during training. There were more injuries, such as during flight exercises when Soras would crash into trees or even each other, but I never acted so recklessly myself since every time I did, I would see that boy's face appear in my mind. On the seventh day of the week, when we prayed at the chapel in the morning and did light chores in the afternoon, I pondered about the bitter Medicine that the Gods made us drink.

Have I truly gotten stronger since I came here?

I suppose in a sense I had. Physically, I was still lean, like all Sora tend to be, but I had grown some noticeable muscle and strength from all the training they'd put us through. I was decent with swords, spears, and slings before, but now I knew how to shoot both bows and crossbows as well. I was taught basic survival skills and overcame many challenging situations with my body intact. Physically, there wasn't a doubt that I had grown stronger... but that wasn't really what I was asking myself, was it? At that time, I could never figure out what I was trying to get at. The question without an answer simply bothered me from time to time.

On this day, however, as I'm standing in a hallway ready to be let into a building I've never seen before, I finally understood what I was really trying to ask myself this entire time.

Why am I still alive?

CEREMONY OF LOST CHILDREN

We'd been told for some time that our training was coming to an end. A celebration of some sort would be held for us in honor of this achievement. A *ceremony* they called it. Was there another meaning to this word? It wasn't often that I didn't know a word, but it still happened from time to time. Sometimes I would come across an idea, thing, or concept that was completely foreign to me, but this wasn't it. I knew the word, but given the context, the meaning seemed to be different than what I'd originally thought it was. Ceremonies are held for the Gods, however, this one was meant for us and instead of bringing joy, it filled me with worry.

The exact date it would happen was kept secret, so when they woke us earlier than usual, I already knew what was happening. Even if the barracks aren't exactly the best place to sleep, it seemed like heaven in comparison to the cold morning air. The afternoons during fall are much warmer, but during the early mornings and nights the temperature drops to the point where it's barely tolerable once the wind starts hitting you.

As we lined up outside our barrack, I saw the Overseers along with the guards. While anyone can be assigned guard duties, *Overseers* were quite different. It was an official and permanent duty that was only given to the most zealous and dedicated Cogs. Normally, they're in charge of overseeing the guards and ensuring discipline is maintained by all in the Academy. As with other specialized roles, they had their own

unique armband symbol. Theirs was a fist holding chains in its grip surrounded by a cog. Their identification number was below in regular script, and as far as I knew, it never went above two digits, which perhaps hinted at their low numbers.

While their role seems logical to have, it's the way they behave that scares everyone. They're strict adherents to the Book of Life, and since many of us are unaware of its full contents, they often accuse us of wrongdoings we have no knowledge of. At times, I feel as though they only do this to keep us in fear as it's quite random whenever they decide to punish us for these *transgressions*. Their power extends to even detaining those of higher positions than them. Compared to the guards, they're also more sadistic and are quick to administer corporal punishment. Oftentimes they surpass the point of their so called *punishment* and beat their victims to the point of injury. I'm not sure why the Academy tolerates this, as it causes various issues at times. Needless to say, their involvement killed any excitement that may have existed for the ceremony.

When they were done ensuring we were all accounted for, they marched us to the main building of the Academy. After opening the doors, we were ordered to come inside where a strange sight greeted us. Most of the time, the halls of the Academy would only be lit by the occasional torch, oil lamp, or candle around this time of year. The windows needed to be shut and covered in order to try and keep the interior from being absolutely freezing since the building was mostly made of stone. I fully expected to be wandering around in the dark with the guards' torches being the only indication of where to go. To my surprise though, the entirety of the building seemed to be bathed in light.

I'd never seen this many torches and candles lit at the same time before. It was a waste of resources to do so, but I assume that the special occasion warranted such a luxury. Despite the grandiosity of it all, I never did have much of a liking for the interior of these buildings. They always felt oppressive in some way. Maybe it was the large size or the fact that everything was stone instead of wood. It felt foreign somehow. Everything new was made of wood while these older buildings were carved out of stone. They never told us, but I could guess that these were pre-war buildings.

Whatever techniques they used to make them seems to have been lost. It's not as if the Academy couldn't make buildings from stone, they could and they did, however, they were much smaller and basic in comparison. Instead of large arching doorways and a giant central room that stretched several floors, the best they could manage were simple, squarish buildings that were made out of individual, roughly cut blocks and never more than a single floor.

Still, despite their inferiority, there was something more comforting about interacting with something you saw being built, rather than something that dates back to a time long before you were alive. I often wonder what this building was used for in the past, or rather what this whole area was really for. There's a large wall surrounding the valley the Academy resides in that provides protection where the mountains open up. In some ways it feels like a military fort and yet there are odd things as well like the white chapel and old houses where the highest ranked members live.

The place where we were supposed to go, somewhere called an *auditorium*, was in an area of the main building I'd never been to. There were many places initiates like me weren't permitted to enter, so until now this area had simply been a curiosity for me. As we got closer, the hall began to get crowded. It seemed as though the doors weren't open yet. Up to this point, us initiates had been separated into groups based on our barrack assignments. Our barracks held fifty each and our area of the woods had two of them. They used to be full, but we lost some people during training so my current estimate is around seventy for my group. Even so, from the look of things, I would estimate that the crowd here was somewhere close to two or even three hundred.

This is merely taking into account people like me who are in an offensive role. I'm not exactly sure how many were truly transferred to support roles or simply put into them from the start. As far as I knew, they weren't a part of this ceremony and likely had their own separate one. Still, given the fact that some of the initiates must have died as well, it makes me wonder how many of us there had even been at the start. On that note, it also makes me question how and where they got so many young people. Shouldn't it be hard to find so many of us if the world is still recovering from the war?

My attention suddenly shifted back to the present moment as I noticed that flying high above us were some Sora Overseers. We weren't allowed to fly within the territory of the Academy, since they worried about us escaping, but they, and guards, were an exception of course. Supposedly, if they catch you flying they'll punish you with imprisonment for some time. Given the fact that this *imprisonment* is sometimes threatened as a worse thing than corporal punishment, it really makes me wonder what even happens in such a place.

Shaking the unpleasant thoughts from my mind, I tried seeing what was happening out in front, but the Tomas made that impossible. Instead, I had to rely on my ears to guess at what was suddenly drawing everyone's attention. At first a clanging of metal, and then the distinctive sound of doors groaning as they were slowly pulled open. It seemed the ceremony was about to start. The Overseers flying above began rushing forward and into the auditorium, while a few stayed behind to help control the crowd. While the Overseers always carried a weapon on them, the guards seemed to only be armed with long wooden poles that they were using to control the crowd. Thankfully, they weren't being too liberal with their use and it was mostly those that didn't keep pace who were being smacked with them.

Although it was the first time I would be seeing this area from the inside, it was easily visible from the outside due to it being the second largest part of the main building, with the first being the center room. It always had a strange look as it seemed unfinished, almost as if tacked on at the last second. Although it was physically connected to the rest of the building, its aesthetic always clashed harshly. There were no grand arches or even windows that could be seen from the outside. It was simply a large squarish building that could best be described as a gigantic, almost perfect, square block of stone. There was something almost inhuman about it.

Once I finally made it closer to the metal doors, the awesome scale of it became abundantly clear to me. I hadn't even stepped foot inside when a loud sound came booming out into the hallway as if some massive, metallic object had been hit against the wall. It shook the building itself and seemed to have not been purposeful as even the

guards seemed surprised. We all stood still for a moment before the Overseers snapped the guards out of their shock by barking their orders to keep us moving. Returning to their task, the guards smacked and prodded the crowd from behind in order to force us forward. Mere inches from the boundary between the hall and the inside of this building, the contrasting darkness made me hesitate in stepping forward. Somehow, there was a cold wind pushing against us that emanated from within.

What are they planning to do to us?

Unnerved as I was, there was no choice to be made as a Sora guard smacked my shoulder from above, forcing me through the doors to avoid further abuse. Almost immediately, it felt as though I'd stepped into a new world. The temperature inside was nearly freezing somehow. Apart from the lack of warmth, the air was also incredibly still. Were it not for the constant sound of footsteps all around me, the oppressive feeling of this room would have frozen me in place.

We could hardly see each other, so not wanting to be left behind, I followed the person in front of me for as long as I could. It only took a moment of me looking away to lose track of him. Feeling lost, I began to wander around, hoping I'd find where we were supposed to go. While walking, I noticed that every noise made was somehow amplified. Even the smallest whisper was audible to everyone within a large distance. This was the only way I was able to find my way back to the others. Following the crowd once more, I chose to keep some distance away from them just in case any surprises were in store.

Although the room was fairly dark, there was still some light coming from somewhere above. Curious about this, I looked upward and saw that there were large braziers hanging throughout the room. Although their fires burned brightly, they were so high above that their light was greatly diminished by the time it reached us, and their sparse placement caused large dark spots throughout the room. Considering how impressive the whole building was, I doubt this had been done by mistake. Somewhere even above these braziers was the ceiling, but from our perspective there was nothing but a pitch

black void above the fires. Were it not for the visible chains that held them, I would have almost believed that they were floating in the air.

Lighting aside, the ground itself was also strange as it was entirely flat and smooth, almost as if the whole thing had been carved out of a single gigantic stone. No other part of the Academy was like this. Not only did it feel strange to walk on, but it would somehow bounce the noise of your own footsteps back up towards you. Curious to try something, I cleared my throat and listened in horror as the sound bounced around the room.

That is the first and last time I will ever do that.

The whole thing felt incredibly surreal, especially upon seeing the pillars that held the building up. We had pillars in other parts of the main building, however, these were completely featureless. Not a single engraving or sign of a human's touch. They were simply gigantic smooth pillars. Their width was enough for five or more to link hands and barely be able to encircle these structures. They stretched up towards the darkness and seemingly went on forever.

The astonishment of everything I was experiencing caused me to lose track of where I was even heading. Refocusing myself, I saw that the others ahead had stopped. I was still a bit away from them, but I could see that they were staring at something. Their whispers clued me into there being an odd sight in front of them. Something that none of them had ever seen before.

Not being able to control my own curiosity, I found myself getting within twenty paces of them, stopping at the last pillar before the clearing where the crowd gathered. As soon as a gap appeared, I was able to see the utter bewildering sight that had stopped them in their tracks. I'm not sure what purpose it served, or why it even existed in the first place, but there was a giant hole in the center of the room. In fact, it was so massive that I suspect it took up close to a third of the building's floor space or more. Now that I knew what had drawn them all here, I felt as though I had even more questions than before. For a moment, I thought I had imagined it, but some of them were even going inside willingly.

Are they insane?

I thought they'd fall in, but they seemed to be *stepping in* instead. As more went inside, a larger gap formed which allowed me to have a better look. Apparently it wasn't just a hole as I'd originally thought. A more accurate description would be a pit with seating all around it, or perhaps *steps* would be closer to reality. These steps wrapped around the entirety of the pit and traveled all the way down until the light no longer reached, giving it the appearance of an endless chasm. Whether or not there was an actual drop at the bottom was something I didn't care to find out. None of the other members that I could see were as cautious as I was. They continuously poured into the thing.

Even if it had seating, why were they so adamant about going inside?

One of the greatest differences between myself and others in my group has been the diminished sense of self-preservation they seem to have. They're still able to feel some level of fear and other human emotions, but usually they're fairly devoid of whatever makes someone like me... well, whatever *I* am. I don't quite know how to explain it, or rather I don't fully understand, but it's times like these that make me all too aware that we're not alike.

Even though seeing the pit shocked me at first, after nothing happened, it seemed to really just be a strange form of seating. For a while, I simply leaned against the pillar and watched them head inside. A part of me still felt anxious, but we'd been waiting for so long that the whole thing was slowly starting to bore me. Normally, I would love being able to do nothing and relax, but I couldn't let my guard down in a place like this. As such, I was stuck in a constant state of standby with nothing to distract myself with. There was no sky, animals, or even flowers to look at. Just a mass of stone everywhere I turned. Stone and the occasional person making their way closer to what appeared to be the center of the room. For such an impressive structure, the novelty doesn't last very long.

I kept myself busy by whispering a few short prayers to the Gods but was interrupted when suddenly the same metallic noise from before deafeningly boomed from the walls

and shook the building. There were no screams, but I could hear a tinge of fear in the voices of those who spoke in the hopes that someone knew what was happening. Unlike before, the noise didn't stop after one occurrence, instead it continued in a rhythmic pattern. My fear quickly gave way to curiosity as it became clear there was some sort of hidden mechanism in the walls. It was very similar in sound to the mechanism that they use to close and open gates. As far as I could tell, there was nothing of that sort inside of here.

Another sound of clashing metal came, but it seemed separate from the one that was already occurring. I found its source just in time to see the distant light of the hallway disappear like a snuffed candle. The doors were being shut and they seemed to be locking us inside.

Why do they feel the need to lock the doors?

“Above.” I heard someone say. Turning upwards, I saw another light that was separate from the braziers. As impossible as it was, a giant platform was slowly descending from the shadows. Are they lowering something to us?

Wild animals.

A monstrosity.

Death.

My mind raced with ridiculous ideas that only served to frighten me and yet I couldn't ignore them. The Academy has only so many resources and they've never been shy about weeding out those that they see as burdens. Still, would it really make sense for them to kill so many of us after all we've done? If they wanted to kill us, it'd be a lot easier to just slip poison into our food or work us to death. Even if it's illogical to think they're going to kill us, my heart simply wouldn't listen to reason.

The constant clanking of the chain only helped to worsen my mental state. The sound only reinforced the idea that the final minutes of my life were potentially ticking away. My eyes were glued to the platform, and in the darkness, my vision began to play tricks on me. At first I thought I truly saw a monster, then it was a bonfire, then it was... a small army? The platform had descended far enough for me to finally catch a glimpse of

what it looked like. It had its own light source and it seemed to be made of a wire-like metal that allowed you to see through the bottom. Now that it was closer, one of my absurd ideas seemed to have actually come true. It really appeared to be a mass of soldiers.

Between the rhythmic clanking, there suddenly came a perfectly timed beating of what sounded like wood against metal. Over and over in unison, they would counter the sound of the lift in an act that was both impressive and intimidating due to how many of them there were. A platform of that size could perhaps hold a hundred, but it didn't seem to be entirely filled. Rather, these soldiers were forming a perimeter around something in the middle.

The majority of them appeared to be Sora, with the only Tomas being near to the center. Not only were these soldiers armed, they wore full sets of armor which was something reserved for distinguished soldiers who'd proven themselves in combat. Unlike us, they should also have a four digit identification number instead of our three digit one which indicates our status as initiates. As they got closer, however, I quickly realized that they were superior to even my lofty ideas of who they were. Until now, I'd never seen one, but there was no doubting who they were. The very pride of the Academy was before our eyes, the *Champions*.

Their armor was heavier than that which would be given to a regular distinguished Cog. Adding onto its uniqueness, it was also decorated. Such touches of personality were basically unseen amongst regular members. It reminded me heavily of the Chaplain's robes, except their decorations weren't as finely made. In fact, it almost appeared to be painted on by each individual themselves as the quality varied. I understood that they were likely all older members of the Academy, which, as far as I've come to realize, means that not all of them have had their memories removed, but why were they allowed to be so individualistic? Our uniforms were intentionally made to rob us of any identity. The identification system itself further emphasized this as our numbers would change along with our ranks once we were full members. If the point was to make us interchangeable, then why are the highest ranks allowed to look like

this? It annoyed me greatly, even more so when I began to realize it was pure envy on my part. It was sinful behavior to feel this way, but I couldn't deny wishing for such special treatment.

Once they'd lowered themselves to about five feet off the ground, I saw that their helms covered their faces but were equally well decorated. Despite their various individualistic features, they all had a white cog painted around the top of their helms as if they were crowns.

They were nothing more than puppets for the Academy, but it didn't stop me from admiring their armor. The way the white paint contrasted with the black of everything else they wore made me realize why the color scheme had been chosen like this. It hid the person and accentuated whatever was in white. For us, our face coverings and our backs had a cog. For them, it was whatever words and symbols they'd chosen from the holy scripture to represent them. We were similar, but not the *same*.

From their platform they stared down at us. Even through their helms I could feel the weight of their gaze. One of them in particular felt as though he were staring right at me which caused me to quickly duck back behind the pillar. It's likely just my paranoia. What sense would it make for one to notice me out of the entire crowd? Regardless, I didn't pop back out until the platform had disappeared from view and descended into the pit.

As it did, the initiates that had been standing on the edge began to pour into it as well. I was tempted to follow, but I hesitated. My curiosity battled against my instincts telling me not to go. I'm not sure what side would have won as the opportunity suddenly ended once a wave of Sora Champions came flying out from the darkness of the pit. Despite us being unarmed, their spears were readied as if they would swoop down and skewer someone at the slightest provocation. They menacingly made motions, threatening those who continued trying to get into the pit. Without words, they'd made it clear that no more were being allowed in at this point. They seemed to be taking security of whatever was on that platform very seriously. I don't doubt they'd kill anyone who ignored their warning.

Shortly after the Soras had flown out, the sound of the chains stopped all at once. The Champions ceased making noise with their spears as well and all that was left was an eerie silence as we waited to see what would happen next. After so much noise, being able to hear my own breathing and the sound of the blood rushing through my ears was an unsettling contrast. This period of waiting felt almost worse than when the platform was descending. I looked around, sensing that something was moving in the shadows, but my attention was quickly drawn back to the pit as a voice suddenly spoke out.

“Today marks the ceremony in which initiates will be embraced as full members of The Hallowed Academy for Champions of the Gods.”

A woman’s voice was clearly audible despite being so far away. She sounded like an older woman, but despite the slight strain in her voice, it was loud enough to carry throughout the room.

“You have all been blessed in having passed such trials and now your future shall be as follows...” She cleared her throat, causing it to reverberate in the silent room. “As full-fledged members of this sacred Academy, your training will cease and you will be expected to undertake assignments at your own discretion, or at times ordered to participate in larger operations. Dutiful members will always find their work to be rewarded, especially when it comes time to reassign rankings. Your rank will determine many things, such as the quality of your accommodations and equipment. The greatest among you will one day rise to be known as Champions, however, even should you lack the talent, I expect your will to never falter in service of the Gods. There will always be a place for those who turn their faith into deeds among your brothers and sisters. Speaking of these labors, your first shall soon begin...”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw movement in the shadows again. Considering most were in the pit, I found this odd and turned my attention away from the speaker to see if I could spot anything suspicious. As I scanned the room, I noticed there were less people than before. I could have sworn more had stayed behind. Had they gone somewhere else? Before I got lost in my own thoughts again, I turned my attention back to what the woman was saying.

“...These members are from the Eastern world. They look quite different from you and I, however, they are dressed in the exact same uniform in order to better hide them. Your first, and only, labor of today is as follows: Use any means to find these Easterners. Should you lose your hood or be incapacitated you will be placed into a low ranking, or even transferred to support duties if we deem you unfit to continue in your current role. If you happen to keep your uniform intact, but fail to find an Easterner, then your rank will be middling at best. Those that accomplish the task, even should you lose your hood in the process, will be awarded accordingly with the highest rank possible for a new member, along with the benefits that come with such a rank. To clarify, the loss of your hood does not mean you have failed, rather it should motivate you even more to accomplish your task. It is possible that you may find yourself injured to the point of being unable to continue. In such an event, you are to walk calmly to the entrance with your hands held above your head or you may simply lay on the floor if you are unable to do so.

Violence against disqualified members will not be tolerated and will result in a diminishment to your future ranking, or perhaps an even worse punishment should we deem it. I must emphasize that the point of this exercise is to separate the wheat from the chaff. Even so, we have a use for the chaff and adding more burden to the Medics is not ideal. Those of you who are seated around me must exit this location in an orderly fashion. The trial will not start until a clear signal is given to commence. Should you behave disorderly before then, you will be restrained and immediately disqualified. As a suggestion, I would keep an eye on those around you while exiting. These new members have already been mixed in with all of you. They could even be sitting right beside you.”

A murmur came as the tension began to rise. I saw the people near me taking stances as if they were about to leap at one another. Just as violence was about to erupt, the old woman raised her voice once more.

“Patience! Remember my warning to you. As for you Soras, you must wait until the starting signal is given if you wish to fly and not a moment before. If you disobey, then

you will be met with force and automatically disqualified, if not outright killed, should you pose a threat. Behave yourselves, and in the meantime, steel your resolve for the fight to come. I look forward to seeing how much you've grown. Do not disappoint me... and do not disappoint the Gods."

With that, the Champions beat the shafts of their spears against the platform one last time in unison, signaling the platform to begin rising once more, noticeably faster this time. The Sora Champions who'd been protecting the entrance to the pit followed along with the platform, forming a floating perimeter. From the shadow of the pillar, I simply stood and stared as this massive thing was slowly swallowed by the darkness above us. I half-expected them to do something bad to us at this ceremony, even so, a sudden trial had caught me off guard.

I now found myself surrounded by both Soras and Tomas. Although they'd likely be busy fighting one another, I was bound to be targeted eventually. I couldn't tell which one was more of a threat. Flying away from the Tomas was easy, but that ran the risk of a mid-air fight once my own people saw me. We were constantly warned during training to avoid mid-air fighting if it's not real combat due to incapacitations being a near guarantee of death. Despite flying being a risk, it was the only reasonable option I had. Trying to survive alone against a Toma, especially without any weapons, was basically impossible.

I need to swallow any pride that I have to survive.

My best chance at making it out of here would be to find a hiding place quickly. I can't deny that it's cowardly, and it would mean foregoing a better rank, but if I fail and injure myself then things could be much worse. Considering the abundance of dark areas in the room, it seems the most logical option.

As I was comparing different routes I could take, a horn was suddenly blown and the room erupted into utter chaos as the brawl commenced. The loud footsteps of a Toma sprinting from somewhere behind jolted me into the air. I'd barely left the ground when I felt a hand reach out and tightly grasp my ankle. By pure instinct, I kicked as hard as I could with my other leg and felt as the heel of my boot crushed one of his fingers. The

pain was severe enough that he let go in shock, shielding his injured hand from a second attack. He must have thought I'd continue, but he was entirely wrong as I used the opportunity to immediately fly to a distant pillar that did not have a brazier nearby. Here, the light barely made it and I was able to search around until I found a crack wide enough to shove my foot into and cling to the side of the pillar. If anyone saw me, I would look ridiculous, but it afforded me safety and a good view of the room.

Although it was a bad time to reminisce, I couldn't help but be reminded of when I used to volunteer to go hunt animals that were endangering the nearby village we often traded with. The forest that surrounded the route and village itself would often need to be culled of wolves, snakes, boars, and even bears. It was an easy way to skip training and have some level of freedom for a while. Often, I would spend most of the day sitting on a tree branch, not too far from what I was doing now. The way that the Tomas ran around, knocking into each other while the Soras clashed in all manner of directions wasn't all too different from how I would observe the animals on the ground. Back then, I wondered if it was sinful to kill animals in such a way. To have them never know of your presence and to simply kill them to ease the lives of others... But now that I'm put into a similar position again, I'm starting to realize there was nothing wrong with my tactics. Animals are stronger and faster than me. Given the chance, they'd kill me without a second thought.

None of these people would hesitate to harm me if ordered to, as they are now.

Are they really that different from animals?

As long as I live, any tactic I use should be considered acceptable. As ridiculous as I may look, living to see another day is worth the shame I bring upon myself... At least, that's the mindset I give myself to cope with all of this.

While waiting for the number of Soras fighting to dwindle, a sudden loud yell caught my attention. Two Soras that were brawling nearly slammed into me, only missing me by mere inches as they grazed the pillar. Locked in each other's other's grasps, they flew straight ahead blindly as they fought desperately to incapacitate the other before crashing into something else. At the speed they were going, it didn't take long for this to

occur. Unfortunately for them, the object that stopped them happened to be a brazier off in the distance.

The smaller of the two slammed straight into the metal bowl of the brazier, instantly falling unconscious upon impact and plummeting toward the ground. The rocking of the brazier caused the flaming contents to spill forth and chase after him. Clinging for dear life, the other Sora managed to hold onto one of the chains. Dazed, and likely burnt as well, he fought desperately to not fall as he was now too injured to fly. Far below him, the other Sora hit the ground with a sickening thud that reverberated across the room, making my stomach turn. Unlucky boy that he was, the still burning contents of the brazier landed atop his body, removing any chance of survival he may have had. I couldn't stand to look any longer and turned away. To die in such a horrific way... I could only pray he didn't feel any of that.

Quite surprisingly, a group of Sora guards descended from the shadows and cleared the area of other combatants. Although the fighting still continued, a perimeter was established so that they could set about extinguishing the flames. Wondering about the fate of the other boy, I looked back to see that another group had been sent to rescue him and extinguish whatever flame still remained in the damaged brazier.

Thanking the Gods that none of them had spotted me, I realized that the newly extinguished brazier had afforded me another opportunity. When the guards left, I immediately darted towards the new dark area that they'd created. I flapped my wings with every ounce of strength that I had until I could hear the air rippling as it flew past my ears. If I flew fast enough, perhaps I'd escape the notice of any other Sora. As I got closer, I could barely even see my own hands, let alone anything that I was flying towards. In blind faith, I continued my desperate flight, praying all the meanwhile that I would be delivered safely.

Please, oh lords of all men, most holy of holies, lead me through this darkness and into safety.

It was suicidal to fly this fast in complete darkness and yet I couldn't risk being grabbed by another Sora. After seeing that poor boy's fate, I could only think of running.

Would the Gods really want to help a coward like me?

Was I not a disgrace for running away and refusing orders?

I pushed the thoughts out of my mind. Flying past the dark area and towards a better hiding spot I'd noticed, I took a gamble on an impulsive decision. Although I had no time to think it over, it was further from the fighting and thus safer as far as I could tell. With the speed I had now, I'd have more of an advantage over stopping and starting once more. Continuing to exert myself, I felt my mind become clearer as if the only thing that existed was this present moment. There were no doubts or questions anymore. Just the sounds of the battle raging all around me.

Closing in on my destination, I suddenly felt a jolt run through my body. A Sora who came from below was mere inches from tackling me and yet I somehow managed to sense him at the last second. Rolling mid-air, our shoulders painfully collided and we were knocked into different directions. While tumbling through the air, I tried to slow myself down, but it was no use. I had already gotten too close to my destination and found myself crashing into a wall with enough force to nearly knock myself unconscious. Had I not braced myself for the impact, I likely would have suffered this fate. The fall to the floor was thankfully not as high as I thought, but it still hurt quite a great deal. Initially, I even thought that my leg had been broken, however, as I squeezed it, I realized it had only been badly bruised. Relief and fatigue took over and I laid on my back knowing that the darkness was far too thick for anyone to notice me. With how heated my body had become, the cool ground felt great against the fabric of my uniform which only let a pleasant amount of cold through.

Once I felt a bit better, I got up and limped my way closer to where the corner of the room should be. Picking a spot, I rested my back against the wall and sunk back down to the floor. Although my landing had been a failure, everything else had worked out about as well as I could have hoped for. From here, I could see the fighting without being at risk of being drawn in by accident. Honestly, I felt a bit of pride in myself for having pulled off such a risky plan. Just as I gave a relaxed sigh, a thought occurred to me.

Did the foreigners have their own objective to accomplish as well?

What if someone somehow finds me?

Would I be in trouble?

Would I appear even more suspicious?

It's annoying not being able to quiet my mind anytime I try to relax. If only I had something to distract myself... Now that I think about it, I couldn't help but realize that there was a similarity to all of this. Looking out at everyone while I sat alone. How funny that a little over a year later I've found myself in the same position as when I awoke here. So much has happened and yet so little has changed...

A chill ran through my body the more I thought about it. Something about this realization had made me deeply unhappy. I suppose most days I'm forced to participate in duties alongside others. Even at times when I may find myself isolated, I'm usually too busy or distracted to think much about it. Since this morning, I've been in a strange pensive mood and now that I'm relatively safe, I'm forced to confront this reality again. Even though I've survived until now, it feels rather pointless when I really think about it. I'm not striving towards anything other than simply seeing another day.

More than that, I'm alone. As far as I know, I'll always remain this way. Nobody will know or care whether I live or die. I am the only witness to my own existence outside of the Gods who never respond back no matter how often I pray. For the older members, I'm too different and insignificant. For those of my group, I'd likely just be reported should I ever reveal my true self to them.

Why am I alive?

The question rears its ugly head again and creates a terrible tightening in my chest. My struggles feel in vain when I know I'll always be trapped here. On the day that I die, another will take my number. That's the simple truth. We're replaceable, interchangeable, and unrecognizable outside of a meaningless number stitched onto our armbands. Only my fear of death and pain has motivated me to keep struggling onwards, but will that always be the case?

When will this motivation cease allowing me to carry the burden of this life?

Will I someday fall down and choose not to get up anymore?

I brought my knees closer to my body and let out a deep sigh. I'm tired... but it's no longer just my body. All I want to do is close my eyes and sleep, but I can't. My safety is only relative and never guaranteed, I can't truly rest.

A new rank may improve my physical conditions, but will that really matter?

Will it make me feel any less tired?

A feeling of suffocation began to overwhelm me and in a panic I removed my hood. We so rarely got to remove these things nowadays. It felt strange to be without it, as if my face were naked, but the shock of feeling air directly on my skin helped to calm my mind.

There was a time when this face covering felt so uncomfortable to wear. I wanted nothing more than to be able to remove it and feel the wind on my face again. When I would sneak off into the woods to take a break, I'd sometimes take it off, but I guess at some point I stopped bothering. Now that so much time has passed, it's almost become like a part of me that I rarely notice. It's gotten to the point where taking it off now has the opposite effect it once had.

Before my mind became flooded with useless thoughts again, I tried to distract myself by looking over the fighting that was still going on. As my eyes wandered, I spotted an injured Sora limping with his hands held high. Even in the chaos, the others took care to try and not touch him, but as he wandered into the areas thicker with combat, he was eventually knocked over. Crawling along the floor, I almost found myself rooting for him as he made his way out of my sight, and hopefully into safety. It truly is a blessing that I wasn't injured as he was. All of this violence just to find these *Easterners*. I wonder what they're like. Would these mysterious people be Sora and Toma as well, or were they an entirely different race than us?

My memories are useless to me, so who knows what's really out there? Perhaps some day I'll be sent on a mission far away from here. Even if I'm not entirely free, it'd be nice to fly and actually go somewhere for once. I suppose that's something that could motivate me to keep struggling through all of this.

By now, the disturbing thoughts had left and I'd gotten so comfortable in my little corner of the room that I almost began to daydream. Just as I was imagining vast stretches of land and endless skies, something out of the corner of my eye caught my attention. At first I thought it was my imagination, but as I turned my head the image didn't disappear. Out of the darkness, a pair of glowing, white eyes stalked me. Recognizing what it was, I froze in fear. It was the same menacing stare that would sometimes appear in my nightmares ever since the first time I saw it. Cold and unmoving, I knew them to be the eyes of a wolf.

THE WOLF AND THE BIRD

*Why hasn't it attacked yet?
Has it been spooked by all of the noise?*

Will it pounce if I move too suddenly?

Does it have a reason to hesitate?

Is it even a wolf?

My mind raced with questions as all I could do was stare back. With the most caution I'd ever practiced in my life, I slowly scooted away until I felt safe enough to stand. As if imitating me, the creature's eyes rose as well. While it didn't reach my height, a wolf of this size could still easily overpower me.

Hesitantly, I waved my hand a bit to see if I'd get a reaction and for the first time I saw it blink and move its head in response. It seemed to cock its head to the side as though it were confused.

What exactly was this thing?

The thought of it being a predator was diminishing within me, and quite stupidly, my urge to get a bit closer was increasing. From this distance I'd never be able to see what it was. As long as I was careful, it shouldn't be too dangerous.

Inching towards it, I made sure to position myself in a way where this creature's back was against the wall and I had the freedom to escape in case it attacked. Although I didn't want to corner the animal, I also didn't want it to escape into the darkness. Once I

was close enough to vaguely see its shape, the beast began to back away. It was a bit surprising how small it was, and it seemed to walk strangely as well. If only I could have gotten a few steps closer. I continued following it, all the meanwhile it kept its eyes trained on me as if we were both examining one another.

For a moment, it looked away before quickly turning back. It did this action twice before I stopped to see what it was trying to do. The very second I stopped moving, it suddenly broke into a sprint which caught me by surprise. Taking flight after it, I followed the creature while cautiously closing in. Looking behind at me, it seemed terrified and broke into a desperate sprint in an effort to outrun me. Just as it was about to reach the light, it stumbled on something and came tumbling out of the shadows and into view. Finally seeing what it was, I was left utterly confused as to what laid before me.

Instead of a wolf, or some other sort of wild creature, I saw a small person lying on the floor. Had this really been a young child all along? I felt immediate guilt at having terrified the boy and landed nearby to check if he was alright. The child flinched upon seeing me land next to him, covering his face as though he believed I would attack him. In response, I backed away slightly and put my hands up in an effort to show it I meant no harm.

“It’s alright... I-I’m not trying to harm you.”

I rarely spoke to others so the words came out a bit awkwardly. The child slowly lowered its hands and continued to stare as if it didn’t quite understand me. Looking at his clothes, I realized why he had tripped. The uniform he had on was too large for him. How strange, I’ve never seen anyone wearing an ill-fitting uniform until now.

“Are you hurt?” I asked, wondering if perhaps that was the reason he wasn’t getting up.

“No.” It suddenly replied, his voice a bit higher pitched than what I expected.

He must be one of the youngest recruits I’ve come across. What a stupid idea it was to put him in a dangerous environment like this. Realistically, what more is he supposed to do other than get beaten? It was a miracle he wasn’t torn apart by the others. By now, I

realized I wasn't wearing my hood and hastily reached into my pocket to pull it out and cover my face. I expected the child to run but it simply sat there, too afraid to do anything. Attempting to change my approach, I kneeled down and offered my hand.

"It's dangerous out here. We should get back into the dark if we don't want to get attacked." He continued to stare at me without answering. "I-If it makes you feel better, I'll stay a distance away. You're free to do as you please, but if you run away it'll only end badly."

"Is... Is that a threat?"

I was taken aback by how scared he truly was. No other Cog would have ever interpreted my words like that. It would have taken an actual threat to get such a reaction. The boy seemed even more apprehensive than I was.

"Uh, no... I'm not threatening you. What I meant was that you'll run into danger if you leave from here. As long as you don't attack me, I have no reason to hurt you. I'm not trying to hunt others."

The boy tilted his head, in the same way as before, but eventually stood up. As we walked back into the darkness, I saw his eyes begin glowing once more. How bright must they be for me to see it through his face covering? There's no doubt in my mind that he must be one of the foreigners. It's the only explanation that makes sense. Every time he turned to look at me, which was quite often, I'd see that strange sight again. It was the eyes of a wolf, but the body of a young boy.

Are all the people of the East like this?

How many races of humanity are there?

Are these eyes their gift from the Gods?

There must be a different process wherever he came from. Here, he would have been weeded out far before reaching this point. Then again, if all his people are this small, then they must have some other blessing from the Gods to help them survive.

Perhaps they're deceptively strong for their size?

The boy was rather quick, maybe it's speed that was hampered by the uniform being ill-fitting?

Considering how much he was staring, the boy must be able to see me. Our eyes are rather sharp and see further than a Toma's, so perhaps his are suited to the dark instead. Rather useful, but I'm sure the Gods would give them more tricks than just their eyes.

Although I was interested in learning more about him, I didn't quite like how much he stared at me. It was the first time, outside of sparring, where someone had looked at me so intensely. In an effort to make it less awkward for myself, I tried to start a conversation with the boy.

"I... umm." The words stuck in my throat as I tried to get them out. Seeing the boy's gaze made me forget what I was about to say out of panic and I blurted out the first thing that came to mind. "H-How long have you been here?"

"In the corner of the room?"

Was that what I meant to ask?

Or did it just come off that way?

Has he noticed that I have difficulty speaking?

This is still salvageable, just continue.

"Er—Yes, how long have you been there? Did you get here before me?"

His eyes dipped down as he presumably nodded before replying, "Mhm, I was in the corner when you first crashed into the wall. I thought you were hurt so I came to look, but you seem okay. Guess you're pretty tough, huh?"

I wasn't exactly sure if crashing into the wall and being mostly uninjured is something I should be proud of. Either way, hearing what seemed like a genuine compliment did away with some of the anxiety I was feeling. This boy seems rather nice, and being a foreigner, there were many things I wanted to ask him. If he had any bad intentions, he would have harmed me while I was dazed earlier. As such, I wasn't too wary of him, but there was something that confused me about his statement.

"I didn't see you when I first crashed here." I stated, somewhat confronting him. "If you were here the whole time, then why didn't I notice you before? Your eyes are easy to spot in the darkness."

“I know that. I just... well, I was hiding before that. When I saw that you took off your hood, I guess I got curious. I wanted to see what your face looked like so I got closer. I knew you’d probably see me, but I thought you were too hurt to catch me. Guess I was wrong, heh.”

He seemed to share my habit of letting curiosity drag us into dangerous predicaments. Even so, his point of curiosity didn’t make sense. “Why would you care to see my face?”

The boy hesitated for a moment. He hemmed and hawed before finally responding with, “I was just wondering what you looked like was all.”

“You were wondering if I looked any different from you?”

“Huh? W-What do you mean?”

“Are you not an Easterner?”

“Of course not!” The boy quickly responded.

“You’re the first person I’ve seen whose eyes glow in the dark... and your uniform doesn’t fit either.”

“Why does that matter? I’m still growing into it!” The boy seemed to back up as though he were going to run away.

I raised my palms toward him in a sign of peace once more. “I already told you I wasn’t hunting for Easterners.”

He stopped and hesitated for a moment before asking in a timid voice, “Don’t you need to capture me? How can I trust you?”

“Well, you can’t really.” I plainly admitted to him. “We’re strangers. Even so, do you think your chances will be better out there with all the people looking for you? I’d say it’s better to hide here than to take unnecessary risks.”

“Hiding?” He responded, sounding shocked. “So you’re hiding too? Guess, you’re scared of those big guys, huh?”

“What? No, I’m not scared. I just... rather not injure myself. It’s still possible to get a decent rank as long as you retain your hood. Risking my life just doesn’t make sense in such—”

“Riiight.” The boy said dismissively before laughing which greatly annoyed me. It was the first time I’d ever felt my pride attacked to this extent. When you really think about it, I’m just doing the sensible thing. It’s not cowardly either as I still put my life at risk, I’m just minimizing the risks. The boy is just a fool to not see it.

A scream in the distance brought us back to the reality of our present situation. The boy quieted down, in a more serious tone he asked once more, “So... You’re really not gonna hurt me, right?”

“No.”

“You promise?”

“I... don’t know what else to say to you. What does it matter if I promise you or not? As I said before, we’re strangers to one another. It’s your decision whether to believe me or not.”

“Huh?”

“I said it’s your choice to believe me or not.”

“No, I got that. I still just want you to promise anyway.”

“And what use will that be?”

“I dunno, it’s just something people do. Might make me trust you since breaking promises is bad.”

“And what makes breaking them bad?”

“Just say you *promise*, alright? It’s not that hard! Look, *I promise not to hurt you*. See? Now you do it.”

Giving into the boy’s strange demand, I sighed before repeating his words. “I promise not to hurt you.”

The boy nodded, agreeing to the terms set forth. I thought our conversation had ended there, but the boy suddenly added, “Y’know, you sound kinda different from most people. You say a lot of words when you speak, did ya know that?”

“I... wasn't aware of that.”

I realized the boy had been moving closer the entire time. By now I could see his silhouette, but his eyes were still the focus of my attention. Although they were still

unnerving, I was put a bit more at ease once I heard his non-threatening voice again.

“I don’t really mind that you sound a little fancy. If anything, it makes you seem smarter. Y’know, I don’t mean to brag, but I’m pretty smart too. I just wasn’t raised to talk like you. You mind if I move a lil’ closer? It’ll help keep our voices down if we aren’t speaking from so far.”

I wasn’t sure if I wanted this boy so close to me, but what threat could he realistically pose? As he slowly inched towards me, I glanced towards the fighting to see how things were going. As far as I could tell, it was beginning to die down. Many of the others were lying on the ground or sitting. A few were still fighting but it seemed as though things were going to end soon. Just as I was about to relax, I heard awkward, heavy steps rushing over towards us.

“I FOUND YOU!”

A Toma suddenly appeared from the boy’s direction, grabbing him before he could run. He must have been looking out towards the fighting as well and been distracted. I shouldn’t have let my guard down either. If I’d been paying more attention, I would have noticed the Toma skulking about. The two of them were struggling in the dim light as I tried to decide on what to do.

“Help!” The boy cried out as the Toma tried to unmask him. I stood there, unsure if trying to save him was the best thing to do. If I intervened, things could get violent. All the Toma wanted to do was remove his hood. Apart from that, I barely even knew the boy in the first place. Was it really worth risking myself over a stranger?

The logical move is to leave him behind.

He loses his hood, but I keep from getting injured. The boy isn’t my responsibility. I don’t know him... but then, why aren’t my feet moving? Even if it’s logical to do this, it felt wrong to abandon him.

It would have been easier if he let the Toma take his hood quickly, but the boy was clutching onto it rather tightly. Annoyed at this, the Toma brought him closer to get a better grip, but this gave the boy the opportunity to swipe at his face. Normally this wouldn’t do much, but to my surprise the Toma reeled back as if overcome by great

pain. Did the boy sneak in a small blade of some kind? As the Toma stumbled closer to me, I saw that his hood was ripped and a considerable amount of blood was falling to the floor. Even through the pain, he still tightly clutched the boy by the arm. At this point, I knew that if I didn't do anything, the little foreigner would be in for a horrible beating.

With how small he was, it wasn't a question if he would be injured, the question was if he'd be killed. Was it really possible for me to fight a Toma though? He looked like a fully grown man. The idea of fighting him terrified me and yet the pleading of the boy was too much for me to ignore. Despite my better judgment, my body began moving on its own.

As the Toma wound back to slam the boy against the ground, I kicked off the wall and flew at him full speed without another second of hesitation. Like a lance, I slammed my elbow into the side of his head, near his ear, with my full momentum. As soon as I made contact, a sharp pain shot through my arm and into my hand, making it numb. The Toma clearly felt the brunt of it though as he nearly fell, losing his grip on the boy as he stumbled.

With a surprising recovery, the Toma spun around at an incredible speed in order to grab hold of my leg. I attempted to kick him away, crushing the tip of one of his fingers, but he was so enraged that his grip only tightened. Sensing the danger I was in, adrenaline began spiking through my body as he yanked me upwards with all of his might. In order to ensure my destruction, he then grabbed hold of my other leg and slammed me toward the floor, seemingly with the intent to kill me. The force of his throw was so great that I didn't even have a chance to counteract it with my wings. I accelerated to the point where everything was a blur and then just as soon as it happened, everything became black.

Whether it was due to the stone floor or the sheer strength of this Toma, my body came back to life as though it were surprised to still be functioning. My vision was blurred and I couldn't breathe. Up and down were foreign concepts as the room spun. The back

of my head ached terribly and every attempt to draw breath was met with horrific pain. All I could do was gasp in vain and panic as I was met with the worst pain of my life.

Not satisfied with nearly killing me, he lifted me once more into the air as I prayed for him to stop. Why couldn't he just remove my hood and be done with it? It's obvious that I'm a Sora. Was he really so angry that he was going to murder me? I closed my eyes and hoped it would end quickly.

Just as I felt him begin to lift me back up, there came a sudden intense force that radiated heat and sound as though lightning had just struck him. The Toma immediately lost his grip on me and I fell back towards the ground. As I slipped from his grasp, I tried to open my eyes to see what had happened. All I could see was a cloud of white smoke as my vision was too blurred to differentiate anything else.

Had something caught on fire?

Am I going to die?

After hitting the ground, I was in too much pain to really care. My vision was blackening and I felt as though I were drifting away from my body. I did everything I could to try and keep my eyes open, but it seemed impossible. Right as they were about to close for what felt like the final time, the horn sounded once more and from high above, I could hear the yells of men as they swooped down towards the ground. They seemed to be yelling commands and shouting threats.

A moment later, I felt someone grab hold of my leg once more which shocked me back into a more lucid state. In my panic, I almost kicked my assailant, however, I quickly realized that the hands that grabbed me were far too small and were having a hard time trying to pull me along the ground. I struggled to lift my head, but I managed to see the boy's small figure using all his strength to drag me away from the smoke and deeper into the darkness of the room.

As the light began to fade, I closed my eyes. The smoke had a strange scent. It had some resemblance to burnt wood, but there were other things mixed in as well. The image of eggs that had gone bad and burst suddenly came to mind.

Why am I thinking about such useless things at a time like this?

Whatever had happened, and wherever the fire came from, seemed unnatural. The only person I could suspect of doing this was the boy, but it didn't seem possible. Still, if not him, then who or what would have caused it?

Had the Gods themselves intervened with a miracle?

When next I opened my eyes, I saw the boy hovering above my face. He was saying something but I couldn't understand a word. Noticing my lack of response, he tried to remove my hood but I reflexively reached out to stop him despite the pain it caused me. Although I didn't feel comfortable having it removed, the real reason for my reluctance was that the face covering masked my weakness. The pain was so intense that I couldn't control the tears beginning to form in my eyes. Every breath was akin to a miracle and it terrified me that the next one wouldn't come. Despite my attempt to stop him, I was too weak. He eventually managed to pull it off which led to me shielding my face with my arm. Even if moving was excruciating, my body simply did it out of instinct.

"It's gonna be okay! Don't give up, alright?! I-I've got something that can help you so just stay calm and keep breathing!"

I found it strange that the boy somehow seemed more frightened than I was. In a strange way, it seemed to calm me down. I'm not sure why. Perhaps I was just trying to put on a brave face for his sake. This didn't seem to work though as he immediately ran away the moment he unbuttoned my jacket. Was it that bad? It didn't seem as though he had abandoned me, but I was worried if he'd be gone for long. It'd be very difficult for anyone to find me here in the darkness and more than his help, I needed a Medic.

As I laid on the ground, doing my best to keep my breathing steady, I began to wonder if these injuries were life threatening. I wasn't bleeding, but I definitely had broken bones. Could I die from something like this?

Would I regret dying like this?

I've done so much to avoid death and yet in the spur of the moment I might have thrown it all away. If I had died during training or some other task, I suppose I would have been resentful... but right now I didn't feel that. I almost felt... proud?

I'm in incredible pain and yet I feel very good at the same time. I saved someone's life, not because I was instructed to, but because I wanted to. I'm not a coward. I'm not a tool. I'm a good *person*. Even if it was just this once, I finally did something I'm genuinely proud of.

What will happen to that boy if I die?

It was a dark thought to have. Chances are, he'll end up like me in no time, alone and simply surviving. That's if he's lucky. I've given him a second chance, but in the end I'm not sure what will become of it. I don't envy the life he will have to live. I hope he meets someone, someday. Even if it's only for a moment, like me.

As the pain grew and my breathing became increasingly labored, my death began to feel more certain. I began to wonder what that boy would think if I died. Would he be sad? It's selfish to admit, but a part of me hoped he would be. If he were, then that means somebody would remember that I existed. It means, I'd actually meant something to someone.

Out of the darkness, the boy came hurrying back with a small jar in his hands. "Okay, umm... Just give me a second. I need to get this stuff on your skin, alright?"

I think he was attempting to perform some kind of basic aid. I wasn't exactly sure what he'd be able to do for this kind of injury, but I wasn't in a position to stop him either. He began to gently rub a jelly-like substance onto my exposed chest. I flinched due to the cool temperature feeling uncomfortable and this caused the boy to immediately apologize.

"I'm sorry! I know it hurts but you'll feel better soon! You can still hear me, right? This is making you feel better, right?!"

I wanted to reassure the boy, but all I could do was grunt and try to control my breaths as the pain fluctuated from tolerable to forcing tears from me. It was strange, I had moments of relief where I could take a normal breath, but suddenly a sharp ache would come out of nowhere and force me to exhale. I didn't want to scare the boy any more, but it was hard to maintain my composure while slowly suffocating. Throughout this ordeal, the boy continued to slather on this strange substance and to my surprise, it was

actually doing something. The pain was actually becoming a bit more manageable. Once he was done, he wiped his hands on my hood as though it were a rag and leaned closer to me.

“Is it working?” He asked while gently moving my head to look over towards him.

I wanted to respond, but every time I took a deeper breath in order to speak the sharp ache would come back. The boy seemed frustrated by this and removed his own hood in order to get a better look at me. I suppose this was the moment where I realized how little of the world I truly knew about. After a year of surviving in a strange place with very few memories, I’d thought I found some feeling of normalcy. I was never exactly sure what would happen the next day, but everything that did happen was still somewhat within my realm of understanding. This, on the other hand, was completely foreign to me. Yes, he was a foreigner, and I expected him to look different... but I didn’t expect him to look *this* different.

Is he an actual wolf?

Perhaps referring to him as an animal was wrong considering he was still human, I think. Still, how was I supposed to explain the sight before me? The top of his head had an actual pair of wolf-like ears and his glowing eyes only added onto the animal-like appearance. As he spoke, I could see that his canines were slightly larger than mine and quite sharp. His ears moved, sometimes independently of one another. Even his hands were strange. Once he’d removed his gloves, I finally understood what had initially happened between him and the Toma. His hands themselves were normal, albeit strangely soft, but the boy’s fingernails were thick and sharp. Although not entirely claw-like, it still gave me great concern every time he came close to my eyes while dabbing away the sweat from my face. How could such a person exist? He appeared human enough, but how much of the rest of his body is animal-like as well?

The more I looked at him, the more I nearly forgot about the pain I was in. I even managed to groan out the word “wolf” in my astonishment which perked his ears and caused him to lean in closer.

“What did you say?” He asked, his furry ear nearly touching me.

“Your...” I took a deep breath and forced out another two words, “Wolf ears?”

I wasn't sure why I said that. I should have said a hundred other things, like asking him to call a Medic, but I was just so absorbed by the idea of there being animal people somewhere in the world that I temporarily became an idiot.

Could there be things like rabbit and bear people as well?

These inane thoughts swirled in my head and the boy's concern only grew. I couldn't see his face clearly but I could tell by the way he muttered under his breath that I'd done the opposite of assuring him.

“You're not making any sense... Oh geez, you're starting to lose it aren't you? I didn't wanna risk it, but—I'll go get someone to come look at you. I promise I'll be back soon!”

The boy quickly rose to his feet and sprinted out of my view. I had no choice but to trust that he would return with help. There wasn't much else I could do.

As I stared off into the darkness, I felt a bead of sweat make its way down my forehead. What would happen if I survived this? I'd so quickly written myself off as dead that I never thought of this. I wasn't sure how long it would take to recover, or if I'd even make a full recovery in the first place. Somehow, the idea of being crippled for the rest of my life seemed more concerning than dying. What would they do to someone who was still alive but crippled to the point of uselessness?

Are they simply going to kill me like that one boy?

As I closed my eyes in order to try and clear my head of these thoughts, I suddenly heard the boy's voice far off in the distance. Even from here, I could recognize his voice from all the others. Amidst the barking of orders, sounds of rushed footsteps, and groans of pain, there was this voice that just wouldn't quit blabbering. Who was that boy talking to?

I slowly turned my head to see the small figure in the oversized uniform rushing back over towards me. At some point he must have put his hood back on as I could no longer see his face. Were he like the others, I might have had trouble identifying him at a

glance, but there was not a single soul in this Academy that looked as ridiculous as he did in that uniform.

“Hey! I’m back, and I brought some help!”

Had he brought a guard along to come help me up? I wondered if I could even walk. The pain of being moved would probably be immense, but if I could actually get to the infirmary, it would do me much better than simply lying here on the floor.

“Uhh... you’re still awake, right?”

The boy prodded my face despite my eyes still being halfway open. Even though his hands were now covered by our uniform’s gloves, I could still feel the pointed tips of his nails through the leather.

“I’m going to need a more detailed explanation of what’s wrong with him. A *Toma slamming him to the floor like a dead fish* isn’t exactly what I asked for. You need to be more clear with me. What did you observe that was causing him issues?”

A Medic suddenly appeared, looking at the boy and then towards me. She was much taller than the kid and had the typical uniform I’d expect. It was rare to ever see the Medics outside of the infirmary. I suppose there were enough injuries that some came here instead of having them all transported over there.

“Can he speak?” She asked while kneeling down next to me.

“He said something before I left to find you, but I’m not sure what it was.”

I gave a small grunt to show I was still conscious and the Medic realized my issue. “I’m guessing the pain is preventing you from speaking, right?”

“Yes... but—” A sharp pain came and robbed me of my breath. Despite my best efforts, I constantly felt as though I were on the verge of suffocating. I wanted to tell her that my greatest concern was my struggle to breathe. Being unable to say more, I had to hope that she could figure this out herself.

The woman uncovered my torso and began feeling around my ribs. I flinched the moment her finger touched a sensitive spot and she pulled back her hand, soon noticing the substance that was now covering her finger. She turned to the boy who seemed to shrink away from her.

“What is this?” The Medic asked.

“Um... Your finger?”

“Oh, you want to be funny with me? That’s fine, you can keep telling your little jokes and we can have a nice little laugh while your buddy here dies. You have any more jokes to share with me?”

The boy was shocked by her words and bowed his head as if offering his neck to the woman. “I’m sorry! I-It’s some kind of Medicine that makes pain go away. I’m not sure how it works though.”

The woman snatched the boy’s hood. He flinched but instead of striking him, the woman used it to wipe the substance off of me. “You used *way* too much. When did you put this on him?” Her voice was stern and filled with a hint of anger.

“I think... like ten minutes ago?”

“*Like*” The woman muttered under her breath, emphasizing the word, as she continued cleaning the gel off me. When she was done she threw the hood down. The boy reached for it and the Medic slapped his hand away. “Leave it! You put that on and it’ll end up getting all over you. You’re lucky he didn’t have enough time to absorb all of this. If you’d waited longer, he’d likely be dead.”

“Seriously?! I didn’t know—”

“And if you didn’t know then why’d you use it?”

“Because I thought—”

“Because you didn’t. If you’d have thought even for a second, then you wouldn’t have gone experimenting on someone who’s in such a bad state. You should have immediately gone for a Medic. You’re not out in the field. You endangered his life for no good reason.” Suddenly grabbing his arm, the Medic began to threaten him. “Give me that medicine, now. I’m going to confiscate it and you’re going to thank me for not punishing you to the extent you deserve. Stealing medicine is more than enough to land you in our prison.”

The boy continued to get chastised as I felt myself getting more and more exhausted. I wanted to sleep. Normally a situation like this would cause me great worry, but right

now I wanted nothing more than to rest my eyes. Was it that medicine that he put on me or are the injuries causing this intense fatigue? I've never been this injured before and I've never had this medicine used on me either, so it's hard to know.

Will I die if I fall asleep?

Or is this what dying itself feels like?

"Look, just stay out of the way while I do my job, alright?"

"Okay, just make sure to..."

I couldn't even keep track of who was speaking anymore or what was being said. My eyes kept closing and I had to bite my tongue in order to force them back open. Even then, at times I couldn't resist closing them for longer than I should have allowed. I risked drifting off to an endless sleep and I was only saved at the last second when my body would jolt me back awake.

From the corner of my vision, strange hallucinations were beginning to pop in and out of the darkness. It was like watching small creatures scurry about when you're alone at night in the woods. I couldn't make out what they were and despite knowing that they weren't real, I couldn't fully convince myself to ignore them.

Why am I seeing these things?

Before I could lose my mind, I was forced back into reality by a flood of warmth emanating from my chest. It was as if someone had set a small fire from within me. It wasn't painful, rather the opposite. It was a wonderful warmth that reinvigorated me with life.

I looked back at the woman and saw that her hands were glowing red. At first, I thought this was also a hallucination, however, I appeared to not be the only one seeing this.

"Woah, what is that?" The boy asked in complete awe of what he was seeing.

"Be quiet." The woman replied without turning her attention away from me. For the first time, I was able to take a full breath. I'd never been thankful for such a basic thing until now. Glad as I was though, I noticed something was wrong with the woman. Her breathing had become heavy. Stopping whatever she had been doing, the glow of her

hands disappeared and she almost fell to her side, steadying herself at the last second with her hand. Despite this sudden change, she recomposed herself quickly and examined me once more.

“As far as I can see, you should be fine now. Can you speak?”

I hesitantly took another deep breath. Touching my ribs, they felt tender, but otherwise everything seemed to be healed. Looking back at the Medic in amazement, I struggled to find my words. “I... What happened? How did you do that?”

“Were you injured anywhere else?” She dismissed my questions and seemed ready to depart without another word. Although she was quite serious, like the other members, her way of speaking wasn’t the same. She was more aggressive, which was especially unusual for a Medic, but the kindness in her actions was still the same as others in her role. Mannerisms aside, her strange ability truly set her apart and also concerned me. I wanted to know exactly what had been done to me, but I had the feeling she wouldn’t oblige such questions. In an effort to be respectful, and to take advantage of the opportunity, I pointed to my head in response to her question.

“My head still hurts. I likely hit it when I was slammed to the floor.”

Despite how gruff she was in her manner of speaking, she was very careful in the way she handled me. It was almost akin to a broken pot being put back together. With the way she gently prodded my skull, and closely examined me, I could almost imagine it.

Without warning, her hands began to glow once again and the feeling of warmth returned, albeit magnified tenfold now that it was in my head. This sensation caused me to shut my eyes but I wouldn’t say it was painful in any way. Rather, I think it’s more accurate to say it was overwhelming. Out of nowhere, the darkness of the room faded away. In its place was a beautiful clear sky with hills of swaying grass that surrounded me. Nearby, I sensed someone standing there, but just as I was about to turn and look, the vision vanished. Quite jarringly, I found myself back in the dark corner I’d never left. The look of confusion on my face must have let the Medic know that something had happened to me, but she sidestepped it with a regular question.

“Do you feel better now?”

Trying to finally get an answer, I pushed for an explanation, even if it risked angering her. “What was that? I saw something when I closed my eyes.”

“It’s nothing you need to worry about.” The woman said with a sigh. “You’re better off forgetting everything you saw today. Nobody will believe you and you’ll only get into trouble if you go around talking about it. A faithful little soldier like you only needs to follow orders and serve the Academy. You don’t have a use for things outside of that, right?”

“But—You’re right.” I answered, looking away in defeat. Whatever secrets she wanted to keep, and whatever had been done to me, was hers to solely know.

“Then just go get some rest. Head to the infirmary once your results have been recorded. You’re still injured, but the worst should be over now.”

I felt at a loss for words but remembered to be polite to the woman, especially after all she’d done. “Thank you... for everything.”

“Yeah.” The woman said brushing aside my gratitude as she slowly got back up to her feet. She seemed ready to walk away but suddenly stopped. At first I thought it was due to her fatigue, but she suddenly turned around and knelt down beside me. “Actually, I’m curious about something.”

“Huh?” The noise escaped my lips as I was caught off guard by her sudden question. I was rather worried that she’d lay an accusation on either me or the boy. Did she know I had been hiding? Maybe she wants to know what that explosion was. The boy stealing the medicine hadn’t even been the worst of our actions.

“Well, I just found it a bit strange.” She paused for a moment and suddenly grabbed the boy by the collar, bringing him closer. “Why is a Shinrin helping a random Sora?”

“Hey!” The boy yelled as he freed himself from her grip.

“I’m sorry, *what* exactly did you call—”

“The girl.” The woman said while pointing to the small person I had assuredly thought to have been a boy. “Why is a *Shinrin* helping you?”

“The... *girl*?”

Of all the things I could have said or emphasized, I chose the worst one. There was a pause and then a nearly soundless chuckling as the woman shook her head and got to her feet. “Welp, it’s clear you don’t know anything.” She said before walking away and giving a wave. “Good luck, kid.”

My attention was quickly diverted to the pair of glowing eyes that stared ominously at me.

“Why did you sound so confused when she called me a girl?”

“Oh... W-Well, I just—”

“Did you really think I was a boy the whole time?”

“No, I—”

“What part of me even looks like a boy? I’m clearly a girl!”

I couldn't help but see a young boy no matter what was said. She lacked the usual feminine *aspects* that I had been used to seeing. Perhaps this is solely due to her age? Age aside, she’s in a combat role so it was a sensible assumption to make. Try as I might to justify things, it didn’t fix the awkward silence that now hung in the air between us. She seemed genuinely upset by my mistake. Trying to ease any hard feelings, I began trying to explain things to her.

“Women are very rarely put into combat roles so I don’t have much of a reference for what a female should look like in the first place. It’s not anything at all to do with you... It’s my lack of understanding—a-and inexperience. I hope I’m making some sense?”

“I guess...” Despite her words, her voice revealed to me that she was still upset. “Even if you don’t see girls that much, couldn’t you tell there was a difference?”

“I umm...” Trying to find a way to not reveal the truth, I looked down at her and instantly found an excuse. “Well, I just never got a good look at you. It’s hard to tell with these uniforms being the way they are.”

“Oh, I guess I can see that! I mean, I knew you were a guy the whole time, but— Wait, shouldn’t my voice be enough?”

“It could have... however...”

The girl came closer, and for the first time I got a good look at her face. The first face I'd seen in so long. In all honesty, despite her strange features, looking at her brought me the same feeling as when I looked at a colorful flower. Even after everything the Academy had done, the longing to see another person without a face covering had apparently never left me.

Staring at her like this made my mind feel blank. All I could do was focus on the way her eyes stared at me. In fact, it was soon all I could think about as it made my heart race. It was something that I didn't find so pleasant after all. It was too personal and direct. Quickly grabbing my hood, I covered my face and immediately felt some relief the moment the familiar fabric touched my skin. The girl seemed rather confused by my actions. Tilting her head, she asked, "Something wrong?"

"Sorry, I suddenly remembered that I'd left my hood on the ground. I don't want to lose it."

"Huh, but I didn't even get a good look at you. Isn't it uncomfortable to wear that all the time? Also, there's still a bit of that medicine smeared on it."

She reached for my hood but before she could grab it I brushed her hand away.

"Face coverings are necessary here. You'll be punished without one. I'm sure they'll overlook it for today but I'm just used to it by now. Also, the medicine isn't touching my skin and it's not as if I'm anything special, so seeing my face is pointless."

She narrowed her eyes as if seeing through my words. "You're just shy, aren't ya?" She said with a teasing grin.

I could feel my face burn with embarrassment. Was she actually right about me? It's hard to tell if my awkwardness is due to my extended isolation or if this is just how I am.

Gods, I can't even face her now.

All of this is too much for me.

"Hey, look back here for a second." Hesitantly I did as she said. Pointing to herself, she gave a smile and asked, "Now that you got a closer look at me, I don't look like a boy, right?"

“No.” I replied, perhaps a bit too quickly based on the way her smile disappeared. I think my response was disappointing, but I’m not sure what I should have said instead. Brushing aside my mistakes so far, the girl offered me her hand.

“You need some help getting up?”

Slowly, I reached my hand out before she quickly took it in one swift motion. It was strange to feel her small hand grip mine so tightly through the material of our gloves. Having someone look at me. Having someone hold my hand. For the first time, someone was acknowledging my existence. In my jumbled mess of emotions, the feeling of surrealness was the strongest. Somehow, the idea that I exist in some way outside of myself feels almost impossible to grasp.

As I got to my feet, I noticed that she was doing her best to keep me balanced. One hand she kept locked with mine and the other she placed on my shoulder to help keep me from falling back down. Once I was standing, the difference in our height became apparent. The top of her head reached the middle of my chest. Her ears added a bit more to her height, but overall she was very short. With such a petite figure, would she really be alright in a place like this? I guess there’s not much of a choice for either of us.

After letting go of my hand she did a strange bow and looked up at me with a friendly smile.

“My name’s Rosalia. Thanks for taking good care of me!”

Rosalia...

Why does she have a name?

BECOMING HUMAN

Now that the ceremony was over, I wasn't quite sure what was going to become of this temporary partnership. Having a random Medic come and almost fully heal me was not something I had planned for. It was a great stroke of luck, but it left me unsure of what to do now. A part of me wanted to stay in touch with this person, but another part of me was worried about the new issues it would bring. Whatever my decision, she'd also have to make her own.

Would she even want to stay with me in the first place?

If the answer was *yes* then there were still some things I had to keep in mind. The most glaring being that she wasn't exactly much of an asset. If anything, she was liable to bring more problems than anything. The girl had a lot of energy and would likely bring attention to herself. Adding to that, it's hard enough to keep myself alive, let alone another person. But that's assuming she'd want to stay. It'll be some time before I'm ready to do anything strenuous.

Would she be willing to wait?

If she abandons me, will I ever find another person like her?

There were so many concerns swirling in my head. Now more than ever though, I had to have faith. The Gods had steered me in this direction somehow. Maybe this was the sign I'd been looking for. To ignore it out of fear of the unknown would be to potentially throw away one of their blessings.

“So how are ya feelin’, better?” I was brought out of my thoughts by the girl’s chipper voice. Despite everything that happened, and the rather gloomy surroundings, she didn’t seem too bothered.

“I’m fine. At least enough to get to the infirmary.”

We left the dark area we’d been waiting in and finally came out into the light. I’m not sure what became of the Toma, but his body was no longer here as far as I could tell. Walking through the auditorium with her was an interesting experience. I noticed that she would constantly glance at me and even slowed her pace in order to not leave me behind. It was quite the nice gesture.

As we made our way towards the entrance, I noticed something that bothered me. I could feel the air directly hitting my skin, which shouldn’t be possible. Now that there was enough light to see, I looked down and quickly saw the issue. That explosion from earlier had charred a few spots on my uniform. Brushing it with my hand, small holes appeared as the soot fell away.

“Something wrong?”

Turning to the girl, I realized that I had slowed down. “My uniform is damaged.” I stated in a matter of fact way.

“That’s rough, can’t you get a new one?”

“Usually they’ll allot you some materials to repair it yourself, but given the fact that we’re full members now, they might feel generous enough to give me a new one. Actually... since you were there when the explosion went off, did you happen to see what caused it?”

“I dunno.” She replied, shrugging her shoulders. “One second I’m trying to figure out a way to get you free and the next there’s a giant flash of light. I couldn’t even turn in the direction of it. Whatever it was, it was crazy, huh?”

With that, my only hope of learning what had happened vanished.

Was it actually divine intervention?

I could think of no other way to explain it. I’ll have to thank the Gods later for all they’ve done for me today.

Looking at some of the other members that were still lying on the ground, I began to realize how miraculous everything was. Very easily, that could have been me. Unlike that strange one, these Medics didn't seem to have any special powers and were taking their time examining the injured. Near to them, guards stood by to ensure their protection and to keep a general sense of order as everyone made their way out. I noticed that these guards weren't armed with lethal weapons like the Champions had been. I suppose they had little reason, given the fact that the only people left could barely stand.

"So what are you gonna do after we're out of here?" The girl suddenly asked.

"Just as I said before. I'm going to the infirmary. I'm still injured."

"No, I meant after that."

"After that? I'm not sure."

The girl went silent as we walked, so I peeked over to see if anything was wrong. It was the first time I managed to see her face clearly. The first thing that still caught my attention were her eyes. In the darkness they were like white lights, but now, I could see that they were a bright shade of blue. Her skin was also quite fair, almost to the point of being pale, which was in contrast to mine which was slightly tanned. Perhaps this was due to my extensive time in the sun? Or perhaps this is a difference between our races. I wasn't quite sure.

Another thing I noticed quickly was how short her hair was. It wasn't much longer than mine and only added onto her boyish appearance. As for its color, I would say it reminded me of the warm red you see near the end of day. It leaned brighter than dark. Poking out from the top of her head were the same two animal ears I'd seen before. It's a very strange sight to behold, even more so when I realized this meant she didn't have regular human ears. In place of where they would be there seemed to only be hair instead.

Looking past her oddities, she did have a rather pleasant face to look at. It was a soft and delicate face with her small nose only complimenting her other features. By now, the girl had noticed my stare and looked back at me. For a moment our eyes met, and in

reaction, I turned my head away as if something else had caught my attention. She likely saw through such an obvious deflection, but she didn't make anything of it. Instead, she proceeded to ask something rather unexpected.

"Umm, I was thinking that after you're better... Maybe you could join us?"

"Us?"

"It might not be like what you're used to, but me and my sister are kind of like a team. I mean, it's not really a team if it's only two people, but with the three of us, it's kinda like a team, right?"

"I'm not sure I follow your logic, but would that really be fine?"

"Sure, why not? I gotta warn you though, she's not that friendly to other people—but I'm sure you'll get along! At least, eventually... I hope." Before I could respond she quickly added, "If you're not sure, you can think about it! You still got a while until you're all better, right?"

"Right... but—"

"But, you can come over and meet my sister so she can get to know you first. That's what you meant to say, right?"

I'd never had someone push themselves onto me in such an aggressive manner. My worry had been that I would lack the courage to ask her to join me, but now the extreme opposite was happening. It's not as if I disliked it, but I almost felt pressured to give into her demands. Shouldn't the roles be reversed? Not only was I older, I'd also saved her, and yet she was the one deciding on how things should be done.

As we neared the entrance, I spotted a handful of guards along with Supporters. The guards were positioned by the exit while the Supporters held large books that they were writing things down in. They seemed to be in charge of processing us for our new upcoming rank assignments. There were three lines that were formed in order to exit. We stood on the one furthest to the right as it was the shortest. Looking around, I tried to see if there were other foreigners, but as far as I could tell there were only Sora and Toma. Granted, the majority of people were hooded, since I assume those without one

were still lying on the floor somewhere. Still, I was surprised that I couldn't spot another one of this girl's race.

I believe the woman called her a *Shinrin*. I wonder if that word has any meaning, or if it's the same as with *Sora* and *Toma*. I'm sure there had to have been a meaning at some point, but if that were the case then it was lost to time. While the girl was the smallest that I could see, there were others somewhat near her height. There was a chance they could be other *Shinrin*, but they could also just as well be *Sora* who were younger than average. Come to think of it, I've been assuming her age until now.

"I have a question."

"Hm?" She looked up, her eyes looking straight at me once again.

Trying to not let it bother me, I proceeded to ask, "How old are you?"

She seemed to be caught off guard and responded rather defensively with, "Why do you wanna know?"

"It's... just simple curiosity."

"Uh huh, and it's totally not because of how I look, right?"

"Ah—Well, you don't have to answer if you don't want to."

"I *will* answer because I know you're just gonna think I'm some kind of kid! I'll have you know I'm twelve! I think..."

It was hard to believe that she was only two years younger than me. With her being so small I'd assumed she was closer to ten or perhaps eleven at the oldest. She could be lying out of simply wanting to appear older, but I didn't have enough evidence to accuse her of lying, nor did I want to offend her. All that aside, I didn't have any other *Shinrin* to compare her to either. This may just be how they appear on average.

"I see. I'm not sure about my age either, but based on what I was told by the Academy, I should be around fourteen."

"Really? That's the same way I found out since I couldn't remember. Actually, there's a lot of stuff I can't remember, and neither can my sister. Is that normal?"

A chill ran down my spine knowing how close we were to the other Cogs and especially to the Supporters jotting down notes. I shushed the girl and leaned in to

whisper, "I'll explain later. Change the topic or stop talking."

She seemed worried for a moment, but seemingly didn't grasp the severity of our situation. Not wanting to quiet down, she changed the topic as I'd asked.

"Y'know, I was having a really hard time trying to guess how old you were."

"Why is that?"

"Cause you don't look that old, but you act like an old man. I mean, it'd be really hard to picture you dancing, singing, or even just laughing. You're so serious!"

"Is that so?"

At this point, I found it hard to engage with her properly. My worry about attracting too much attention occupied my thoughts. Perhaps it was better to keep her entertained with benign topics. It's not as if Academy members don't speak to one another. As long as she doesn't say or do anything too strange, we should be fine.

"Yup, even when you were in pain you didn't scream or 'nothing. If anything, that made me even more worried."

"Well, I think that's just the way I am."

"It's kind of impressive though!"

Her sudden compliment brought an unexpected smile to my face. Whether it was done to me, or if it's simply how I am, I've never liked my inability to fully express myself. For her to respond positively to it was quite a nice surprise. In my view, humans should be closer to how this girl is, cheerful and full of life. Not like I'd know for sure, but it just felt right.

If the Academy had never gotten a hold of me, would I be more like her?

"Did I say something weird?" She asked after noticing my silence.

"No. I've just never had someone compliment me in such a way. Not like we get many compliments as it is."

"That's kind of sad. You want me to compliment you some more?"

"Uh, that's alright. I think you made your point."

As we made it to the front of the line, I caught a glimpse of what exactly the Supporters were doing. They were writing down our numbers along with notes that

were too small for me to make out. Once the member in front of me was done being questioned, it was my turn next. The Supporter seemed to be a Sora. His hand moved much faster than his mouth, and to my surprise, his armband showed that he was a Bookkeeper and not a generic support role. Why was someone in charge of taking care of the Chapel here?

“Number *seven-hundred and nineteen*, I see that you’ve retained your hood. Are you injured?”

Quickly reverting back to my formal way of addressing other Cogs, I replied to him, “I am. I was told by a Medic to report to the infirmary upon finishing with my processing.”

He began to jot down something before demanding another response. “State the severity of your injury.”

“I was told to not exert myself for the time being... I believe I’ll be unable to perform my duties for some time.”

The Medic had never told me what was wrong, so I made my best guess. I wish I could have seen what he was writing, but he was positioned in such a way where it’d be obvious if I tried to take a peek.

“The Medics will be the ones to determine whether or not you’re fit for duty. You’ve received basic care. A full examination will be done later.”

“I understand, thank you for the clarification.” I responded, knowing that being polite and to the point is the best way to not get into any trouble.

“One last thing, did you complete the objective?”

I thought for a moment as to whether or not I actually completed the objective. I didn’t necessarily catch the girl, but she’s right behind me. As long as she doesn’t do anything stupid, this entire encounter could end on a positive note.

“I have. I captured this one.” I replied before stepping aside and pushing the girl to the front.

“Oh! Y-Yeah he caught me.”

I was thankful in this moment for my face covering as otherwise my reaction would have given us away. I could only hold my breath as I awaited his response. Thankfully,

the Supporter simply nodded and began jotting down another thing to add onto my evaluation. While still writing, he began to speak aloud.

“Although you would have been deducted points for being injured, you managed to complete the objective when most could not. This means that your injury will be overlooked and you will be rewarded accordingly. You have done well today. Proceed to the infirmary as you were instructed.”

I nodded and began heading for the exit. I’d felt the girl tug at my sleeve right as I walked away, but I chose to ignore her to avoid suspicion. Either way, there was only one way in or out. Walking deliberately slowly, I tried to overhear what the Bookkeeper was going to say to the girl.

“Your performance today was irrelevant. Return to the area you initially came from. Your new rank and uniform will be provided after.”

Did they really just use them like some sort of object for us to fetch?

By now I shouldn’t be surprised by how they treated us, but I thought there would be a reason for putting them into such danger. I guess they were simply giving them the same harsh welcome that any other member would have.

Once the man was done speaking, the girl hurried along and came to my side. The entrance to the room was well protected, but the guards let us pass without issue as they were able to observe who had gone through processing and who hadn’t. We’d only made it a few steps out of the room until the girl was once again tugging on my sleeve.

“Before you go to the infirmary, you mind meeting my sister first? We might not see you for a while so it’d be nice if you could say hello.”

“I don’t mind, but I’m confused as to why it’s so important to meet her right now.”

“It’s not that... I was just thinking that it’s better for her to get used to the idea of you being around. She’s kind of— I guess the best way to put it is that she doesn’t like strangers.”

“Is she worried I’ll harm you?”

“Maybe... I’m not really sure to tell you the truth. As far as I remember, she’s just always been like that, but I promise you she’s nice once you get to know her! You don’t

really look like the kind of guy that'd be scared off that easily, right?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Oh yeah, her name's *Senga* by the way."

Ignoring the fact that she'd dodged my question, I asked her something that had been on my mind earlier. "Do all you foreigners have names?"

"I dunno, I didn't remember my name but my sister did. Weird thing is she somehow forgot her own name instead and the only reason she knows it now is because it was written down somewhere. Do you know why that might've happened—"

Noticing some of the glances we were getting, I pinched her arm and whispered for her to be quiet. She pulled away at first, but seemingly understood something was wrong and kept her mouth shut. Quickly grabbing her arm, I led her out of the hallway and towards a nearby exit. We needed to go somewhere where we wouldn't have people overhearing our conversations. If I wanted to keep her safe, there were things she had to understand.

Once outside, I leaned closer to her and warned her once more, "Keep your voice down. You're going to bring a lot of negative attention if you keep saying so much for everyone to hear."

"Did I say something wrong?" She asked with some fear in her voice.

I let go of her arm and instead made sure to keep an eye on her. From her perspective I must seem a bit unhinged, but I'm doing this for her own good. Even with how confused she was, she still trusted me enough to follow without issue. Walking down a familiar path, I led her to an area where people rarely came. It was a footpath that was slowly disappearing in the grass as barely anyone used it anymore. Another nearby path was much wider and better maintained, but for our purposes this was perfect. Stopping to make sure that nobody was around, I finally began explaining things to her.

"I know I'm acting strange, but there are some things you need to know. First, we don't have names here. Our memories were tampered with and we're supposed to have lost any semblance of our past selves. Second, we don't know how to read either. Some of the Supporters do, but the Offensive roles all seem to be illiterate. If you make it too

obvious that you're literate, or that you're not a blank slate, you'll end up attracting unwanted attention. I'm not sure what they'll do, but if they come for you I won't be able to save you. Please, try and refrain from speaking so much when we're around others."

She seemed hesitant to accept what I said at face value and tried picking apart my reasoning. "But, not everyone is a *blank slate* like you said. What about the Medic lady? I get that this place is weird, but what you're saying is harder to believe."

Realizing that she made some sense, I tried to better explain it to her. "There were people like you who didn't seem to be completely blank at the start, but they didn't last long. They started to disappear week after week and eventually they were all gone. You're correct in seeing that the older members aren't like us, but for some reason this was only done to people around our age, or at least, it was more potent for us. I doubt that anything you did until now would warrant someone reporting you, but it's best we start being more cautious. I'll do everything I can to try and teach you how to survive here, but while I'm recovering there's one specific group you must avoid at all cost. Stay away from the people with fists on their armbands. They're Overseers, the biggest threat to someone like you and I. If you have to speak to another Cog, then remember to keep conversations to short and simple sentences. Be respectful, and don't ask questions that aren't absolutely necessary. I'm not trying to scare you but you need to understand this."

"It's not funny to try and play jokes on me like this... Please don't try and scare me, okay? I barely came here and everything so far has been really weird."

"It's not some sort of jest. Have you not noticed everything that's happened so far? I'm not sure where you came from but you should have realized by now that something is terribly wrong. We're not like you. I have no name. I have no idea where I am. I don't even know who I was before coming here. I'm not sure how much clearer I can make this for you."

"You're serious?" She looked horrified at first, but quickly took a breath and calmed herself. "I knew something weird was going on... They forced me into that crazy fight

after all. Still, my mind isn't completely blank like yours and yours shouldn't be either. I mean, we're still *us* in some way, right? Even if most of what you're saying might be true, I don't think you're *completely* right. If you were, then you wouldn't have helped me. You're not like the other people here. Some part of you must still be in there and you just don't know it."

"I'm not sure how to answer that... I truly don't remember a single thing. Whether I helped you or not doesn't change that. Unlike you, I'm a lot closer to being like the others."

"You really don't remember a single thing?" She asked once more incredulously. "You've got to though! Think about it. If what you're saying is true then we wouldn't even be talking right now. Can't you see how that doesn't make sense?"

"I appreciate the optimism, but it doesn't change my reality." She seemed disappointed so I threw in something extra I hadn't planned to tell her. "To tell you the truth, sometimes I have horrible dreams that feel real but when I wake up my mind feels foggy and I can't remember the details. The best I've ever come up with is that at some point I was on a boat. I know it isn't much, but it's all I've gotten in the year I've been... I suppose, *awake*, is the word I use. For all I know though, it could have just been a strange dream."

"Wait, I remember a boat too! And then... Ach, I can't remember what really happened during or after! I'm pretty sure it was pretty recent, like maybe three weeks at most. Was it the same for you?" Before I could answer, a look of horror came onto her face. "Wait, does this mean our memories will never come back? I can't even remember much from when I was little. I-I'm still the same though, right? I think I still remember enough to be sure I'm the same person... I hope."

The sudden existential crisis seemed to weigh heavily upon her. Perhaps I shouldn't have said as much as I did.

"It's better for you not to think too much about it. There's no answer for either of us and as it stands we're at least in a better position than most."

“I guess so, but...” She hesitated and then dropped whatever she was about to say. Her ears drooping down to accompany her depressive mood was quite the sad sight. Although I was glad that someone could finally relate to my situation, I wonder if it was the right decision to tell her all of this. Perhaps I’d gone about it the wrong way. The poor girl is a stranger in a foreign land. On top of it all, she wound up here with me of all people being the only help she has. She might not have gone through the same things I have, but her burden isn’t any lighter.

Staring off into nothing in particular, she spoke aloud. “Y’know, I feel like an idiot for not having noticed how bad things really were. I guess my sister kept me safe by being so worried about strangers that we basically never spoke to anyone else. I don’t think she knew either, but if she listened to me we would’ve been found out by now. Aside from that, we couldn’t figure out why we had trouble remembering things, so we put the blame on a scary storm we ran into while travelling here on the boat. Since it was the only thing that made sense, we thought that maybe we’d hit our heads or something. Your explanation makes a lot more sense though, but it worries me because now I have no idea what to do...”

Seeing the sad look on her face made me feel guilty despite my good intentions. If not for her sake, then for the sake of my own conscience I wanted to find a way to cheer her up. It seemed a fairly difficult task at first until I remembered something that might actually be helpful to her.

“Before we go meet your sister, I want to show you something.”

She simply nodded and allowed me to guide her. I wasn’t sure what was going on in her mind but it was clear she was hardly paying any attention to where we were going. If I was in her situation, I’d likely be in a similar state as well. Considering this place always brings me peace, perhaps I can share it with her. Seeing the chapel in the distance, I knew more or less where we were. As I took the girl off the path and into the woods, she seemed to hesitate in following me.

“Where are we going?” She asked, waiting for a reply before venturing deeper.

“I wanted to show you a safe place where you can relax on your time off. Everywhere else in the Academy usually has people passing by. As far as I know, it’ll be a safe place for all of us. I’m not sure if you’ll care for it, but at the very least you can keep it in mind if you need a place to rest and not be bothered.”

The girl hesitantly followed me as we ventured deeper into the woods. I know she may find this worrying, but I’ve never minded it personally. For me, this was the only place where I could find peace and solitude. I wasn’t sure if she would like it, but I hoped to at least distract her for a while. In a selfish sense as well, I’ve always wanted to show this place to someone else.

The path there was a bit difficult, as you had to cross many thorn bushes and crawl over a few fallen trees. I hadn’t come from this direction before, but I had a good feeling I was going the right way. In the past, I’d left a few marks on nearby trees surrounding my sanctuary in order to find my way back no matter what direction I came in from. As I got closer, I eventually spotted one of my marked trees and knew exactly where to go from here.

“We’re almost there.” I called back to my companion who was struggling to pick a thorn from her hand. “You see that tree that has three horizontal slashes with a line running through the middle? I use that to mark where it is. Once you spot one of those symbols just go straight ahead and you’ll eventually reach it.”

She looked up at the tree but seemed more concerned about the thorn stuck in her hand. I was hoping she’d be a bit more enthused but hopefully she’ll feel better once we get there. The rest of the way is much easier as the foliage decreases until you eventually reach a nice round clearing. Once I saw my familiar sanctuary, I stopped her for a moment as I had a surprise in store.

“There’s something else I want to show you, so wait here while I go get it.”

She simply nodded, still in low spirits. Once again, I wasn’t sure how to make somebody else feel better, but I thought the best way was to share something that was rather precious to me. After getting through some thick underbrush, I came to the spot I’d taken a mental note of days before when they first appeared. I never thought to give one

of these to someone else, but they were easy to pick and fairly portable. Although I felt a bit of guilt in removing it from where it grew, I knew that they didn't last for long anyways. Hopefully she would enjoy it as much as I did.

Upon returning, I found her sitting on the log that I had painstakingly moved into a nice shaded area a few months back. When I didn't sit in the trees, I would sit down there instead, sometimes napping on the log itself. I didn't get to come here as often as I liked, but it was one of the few peaceful areas in the Academy. Before I could even get close, she'd already turned her head and noticed my presence. Looks like her ears weren't just for show.

"So this is the place you were talking about?"

"Uh, y-yes, it is." I replied a bit embarrassed to finally have someone else here. "I know it's not much, but I wanted to show it to you regardless." Whether it was for my sake or a genuine one, she had a smile on her face. It wasn't as large as before, but it was a welcome change.

"It's nice." She said with a relaxed sigh. "When you're all the way out here it's almost like none of it is real, huh? I can talk to you like normal and we don't have to worry about bad things happening to us."

I sat down on the log next to her and stared up at the creature she was looking at. It was a small blue bird that was very common in these parts. Strange that it hadn't left for the approaching winter. Perhaps it was just a bit lazy.

As it sang, it turned its gaze down at us. Just as we examined it, the creature did the same in turn. A small wolf-like girl and a boy with a masked face sitting on a log in the middle of the woods while dressed in strange uniforms. There was no way it could make sense of it, and yet it still did the best it could. Unlike the bird, however, we couldn't fly away from this strange situation. As such, we needed to make the best of it we could and that included me sharing this place with my new acquaintance.

"I know the forest may seem a bit frightening, and you definitely shouldn't come here at night, but there are some nice things here as well." I stopped for a moment and

carefully pulled out the flower I'd hidden in my pocket. "I'm not sure if you have these where you're from, but I find them to be quite beautiful."

I handed her a yellow flower from one of the bushes that was near to the clearing. They seemed to be at their best around this time of year. I'd made a habit of keeping track of the changing flowers that grew here. They all had different appearances and smells, but I remember these flowers in particular growing around the time I first came here. In those harsh first months, I had to take solace in the smallest comforts I could find to keep myself sane. This was one of those comforts. Small, sweet, and fragile as they were, they always remind me that both good and bad things come to pass.

Rosalia seemed a bit surprised that I was giving this to her. Despite her initial shock upon seeing it, she gladly accepted it. For some reason her face reddened. Was she embarrassed at the fact that I'd given her a gift and she had nothing in turn? It wasn't much, but I'm glad she thought enough of it to get so worked up.

I watched as she turned the flower around in her hand. She seemed to be paying close attention to it. I'm not sure what the girl was trying to see, but her interest seemed genuine. As for me, I always just liked the color, shape, and smell of these things. Perhaps it was the same with her, but the way she examined it so closely almost made me believe there was something there that I couldn't see.

Taking off her glove, she carefully rubbed the petals between her fingers. She took great care to not poke holes in it with her nails. When she noticed the thorns on the stem, her expression changed to one of annoyance. Bringing the flower closer to her face, she took in its aroma, closing her eyes and seeming pleased with it. I thought things were going well until a look of shock came to her face.

"What's wrong?"

"I just remembered something." She responded, rather astonished. "It's a really random thing from a long time ago, before I even met Senga. We had flowers like these everywhere, fields full of 'em. They weren't yellow though. They were red. A dark red too."

"Did the smell trigger a memory?"

“Maybe... I mean, if the ones from the past smelled similar then that might have been enough to make me remember. Doesn't this mean that our memories aren't gone forever?”

“As I said before, I'm not sure. It could also be that my memory loss is more severe than yours... but that doesn't mean you're wrong. Whatever the truth is, it doesn't bother me as much anymore.” Changing subjects, I called her attention to something that had been on my mind. “I've been wondering, if you and your sister arrived here at the same time, then why wasn't she at the ceremony?”

“They said they were going to put her in a *Support* role... Is that a bad thing?”

“No, if anything it's safer than what we do.”

“Oh, that's good.”

“It's good, but you're not exactly treated very well if your task isn't important. Medics, Bookkeepers, and Weaponsmiths are treated well for example, but something like a cook or messenger tend to be treated worse than us. Supporters sometimes go on missions as well, but I'm not sure how that works. At the very least, it's unlikely she got the labor tasks that are pretty grueling. Those are usually reserved as punishments or for those that have no talent in any other position.”

“Ah...” She appeared gloomy once more. “Our lives were pretty hard before coming here. I guess nothing's really changed, huh?”

I almost slapped myself at the realization that I'd done it again. She twirled the flower in her hand with the same distant look in her eyes as before. I'm used to the silence of not having anyone around, but this form of silence was unbearable.

“I'm sorry.” I apologized while looking away from her. “All I wanted to do was make sure you were prepared to survive while I recovered. I'm not sure how long it'll take so I wanted to inform you of everything I could. I know it's a lot to think about at once... If there was a better way—”

“You don't have to apologize... You didn't do anything bad. I might not like what you told me, but I'm glad you did. You even took the time to try and make me feel better.”

“It's just that I feel guilty for—”

“And on top of it all, you even showed me your secret hiding place and gave me this pretty flower. It’s only been me and my sister until now, but I’m glad I met you. You’re a really nice person.”

“Well, I...” The sudden compliment hit me much harder than it had the first time, especially with the way she seemed embarrassed in saying it. It made me feel special yet also brought a frantic feeling at the same time. I felt obligated to reply and yet nothing came to mind. My body seemed to take control as I suddenly stammered out, “W-Well maybe we should go see your sister now.” Almost as if trying to run away from the situation, I quickly forced myself to stand.

“Ah, wait a second!” She yelled before pulling me down. A groan escaped my lips from the pain of being suddenly forced back down. “Oh! I’m so sorry! I didn’t mean to do that!”

After a moment of recovery, I stared at her in silence so that my discontent would be made clear. Taking a deep breath, I checked to see if I was fine and then slowly let it back out. “What was so important that you had to pull me back down like that?”

Sheepishly, she replied, “Umm, since you gave me a gift, I wanted to give you one too.”

Rather surprised by this, I rejected it as I didn’t want to burden her. “You don’t have to force yourself. I didn’t expect anything in return.” Before I could get up, she put her hand on my shoulder and this time, more gently than before, forced me to stay seated.

“Nope! I’m not gonna let you go until you accept it. It’s an important gift. You know what it is?”

“Am I supposed to guess?”

“Umm, not really; I’ll just tell you! My gift to you is...” She paused for a noticeable amount of time to build the tension before suddenly exclaiming, “Your very own name!”

She was beaming with a large smile. The swings in her mood really kept me on my toes. Still, my very own name. I guess that could fix some issues, but wasn’t it something you were born with? I’m not sure if I would like to be named by her either. I feel as though she’s going to give me a ridiculous name for the fun of it.

“You realize I’m not some sort of animal, right?”

“I know you’re not, dummy!” She answered a bit annoyed at my dismissal. “What do you even call yourself anyways? You still need some way to tell yourself apart, right?”

I pointed to the armband I wore which contained my number. “I’m number *seven-hundred and nineteen*. Often, we’ll use our last digit or two for short, like *nine or nineteen*. It’s uncommon for us to run into someone with the same last two numbers, but when it happens we just use all three... Although, I suppose after my rank changes my number will as well so I’ll have to get used to whatever my new identity is.”

“And what happens if someone has the same three numbers?”

“There’s only one *seven-hundred and nine-teen*. I suppose once we get our four digit number I might run into my replacement, but...”

“See? It’s a dumb system! It’s confusing and you’re just gonna end up losing the only way to tell yourself apart!”

“I believe that’s the point.”

“Even more of a reason you need a name! How else am I gonna find you again?”

“We can just meet here again at some point. We’re bound to cross paths eventually. Either way, will it really matter when my face is covered and I’m dressed in the exact same uniform as everyone else?”

“Oh yeah...” She thought for a moment before blurting out. “Well, I bet you’d be happier with a name anyways! It’s not right for you to not have one and I’m not calling you by some random number either! You’re a person. People have names. Plus, you’re my friend and I wanna have something easy to call you by.”

A *friend*... I don't think she understood the weight of her words at that moment. Without realizing it, she’d already given me the greatest gift I could have asked for. When she put it that way, it was hard to deny her request.

“Alright... I’ll allow it, but please don’t make it anything silly. Other people, like your sister, are bound to call me by this. In the future, we may even meet more people like us. If that happens, I don’t want them calling me something you found funny at the moment.”

“So *Birdie* is a no-go then?”

My lack of a response as I shook my head in disbelief was enough to get the message through to her. Although she let out a giggle at this, there was a hint of nervousness which worried me. If she'd been serious, even for a moment, with a name like that, I dreaded hearing the other options.

“C'mon that was totally just a joke, okay? Have a little faith in me.”

“I'm letting you name me so I'd say I'm putting a fair amount of faith in you already. Now let me hear a serious suggestion.”

She put her index to her bottom lip as she thought carefully about what to say. If she came up with another *joke* name then I was more than likely going to resort to giving myself a name.

“Hmm... If you were a girl it'd be a lot easier. I could name you after a flower like me... By the way, I remembered something interesting. Do you know that I share a name with the flower you gave me? Pretty crazy coincidence, huh?”

“The flower is called a Rosalia?”

“No, it's a rose, but they sound the same, right? Senga calls me *Rose* for short and now I remember where she got it from. I guess I could also give you the name of a flower since you like them so much, but it'd be kinda weird.”

“Why is that?”

“Because if I remember correctly, they're used for girls' names. Oh! What about naming you after an animal then? What about... a wolf?” Her toothy grin showed me that this was another one of her jokes, but at least this time there wasn't a hint of seriousness.

“Well, that certainly would be something. A Sora named *Wolf* and a wolf named after a flower.”

“I'm not a wolf!” She reminded me, sounding a bit offended. “I'm a Shinrin, remember? We just happen to have these ears, fangs, nails... and I guess tail too but—”

“You have a tail?” I asked before immediately looking behind her to see if she was telling the truth.

“I have it tucked inside my pants since they told me to hide it earlier. We didn’t get these uniforms until today so I didn’t get the chance to modify it. It’d be a pain to have my tail out when it could risk my pants falling down. I can just cut a hole in them later, but—Wait, you’re distracting me!”

“Why don’t we just leave it for after we meet your sister?” I suggested in the hopes that we could drop this for now so I could convince her to show me her tail. It was such an oddity that it piqued my interest.

Was it really like how I imagined it?

The more she shows me, the more wolf-like she really is.

Although I knew a name was important, that could be done at any time. This was something I definitely wanted to see before I left for the infirmary. Not confirming things with my own eyes will just endlessly torture me with questions later on.

“You’re going to get a name and you’re going to like it! How else am I gonna introduce you to my sister? If you wanna rush it so badly, I’ll just call you *Birdie* then!”

That name almost sounded like an insult. She seemed to be getting frustrated by my lack of cooperation. I guess I had no choice. After all, she was genuinely trying to do something nice for me.

“Alright fine, whatever name you come up with next, so long as it isn’t ridiculous, I’ll accept it.”

“I’m taking that as a promise.”

She looked me up and down before closing her eyes. I noticed that while she was thinking, her ears would twitch and move independently of one another as though they were involved in her thought process. One would stand while the other flattened, and then the pattern repeated in the opposite. Although seeing such a thing was still uncanny, I was also very curious to see if they felt like those of an actual wolf. I’ve never been able to touch the ears of a living wolf, so it was hard to pass up such an opportunity. Leaning in closer, I debated whether or not to do such a thing. In my hesitation, I took too long and when she opened her eyes she saw how close I was and jumped back in fright.

“W-What are you doing?!”

“Uh, sorry I was...” I struggled to find a good excuse. “There was an insect in your hair.” It was hard to tell if she believed me, but at the very least she seemed to calm down.

“Geez, I can’t even think with you around.” She ran her fingers through her hair at first because of what I’d said, but soon began to smooth out her messy hair instead. “Well whatever, I came up with the perfect name while you were busy messing around. You ready for it?”

“I’m ready.”

She pointed her finger at my face and announced triumphantly, “From here on out, your name will be... *Captain!*”

“Captain?”

She seemed to deflate as my unenthusiastic reply pricked her pride. I didn’t particularly dislike the name, I was just confused by it. Out of everything, why would she choose this? It’s more of a title than a name, isn’t it?

“You don’t like it?”

The worried look on her face made it impossible to reject it. I suppose it wasn’t a ridiculous name, just an odd one. She had technically fulfilled my request and I couldn’t go back on my word.

“Before I decide, I just want to know, what made you choose *Captain?*”

“Well, you see... Once the three of us are all together you’re gonna be like the leader of our little group. You’ve been here the longest so you should know more than us. You also saved me, so if there’s anyone I wanna follow, then it’s you.”

Her genuine expression of gratitude jabbed me right in the heart. I’d be a monster if I rejected it now. Swallowing my pride, I bowed my head in acceptance.

“If that’s how you feel, then I suppose Captain will do just fine.”

To my surprise, she suddenly grabbed my hand and pulled me to my feet. I grunted from the pain and once again she quickly begged for my forgiveness. Trying to move away from her mistake, she began speaking once again.

“Y’know what? Since Senga calls me Rose, I wouldn’t mind if you did the same. It’s shorter and easier to say, right?”

“It is.” I said aloud while trying to arrange my thoughts. “However... I’d prefer to call you Rosalia if it’s not an issue. In my mind one is a flower and the other is you.”

“Why can’t you just call me and the flower by the same name?”

“Well, you said a name is something you call your friend by. In that case, I want to call you Rosalia, even if it’s longer.”

She seemed a bit confused at first, but gradually a smile crept up on her face. “Geez, you’re a weirdo, you know that?” I was stunned by the sudden insult, but it didn’t appear to have been done maliciously. Gently pulling me along, I wasn’t exactly sure where we were going as the barracks were in the opposite direction. Nevertheless, I simply followed along to wherever my friend was dragging me to. “I guess it’s fine, even if you’re the only one that does it... Captain.”

HUNGER

I'd initially thought she was just going to pull me off the log, however, she seemed intent on leading me by the hand somewhere. Although I wanted to ask her where she was going, given the fact that she's new to this place, I also found it hard to focus my thoughts. Everything we'd done thus far felt so new and strange to me. I always wished for a friend, but I never thought about what this would realistically entail. Her unpredictable actions are rather hard to deal with. Normally, I like to plan things out in my head before doing them, but this seems impossible with her around. The loss of control is something I'm struggling with. On top of that, I also now have to start considering her wants and not just my own.

"Hey Captain, ya hungry?"

Her question snapped me out of my thoughts. It was already the afternoon and such a mundane thing as eating had been the last thing on my mind. "A bit." I responded before my stomach betrayed me, growling rather loudly at the thought of food.

"Sounds like you didn't get to eat in the morning either, huh?" Letting go of my hand, she turned to me. "Actually, there's something I was sorta thinking about. How come you guys eat that nasty soup all the time?"

She was referring to our staple meal which was a soup that looks like blood, but is really just colored red from the ingredients they put in it.

“I’ve never really had a problem with it.” I admitted. “It does get boring eating the same thing, but they at least change the ingredients from time to time based on whatever is growing in the fields or arrives from trade. Anyways, we sometimes get fruits and other small things as well, so that’s something to look forward to.”

“Really? That doesn’t sound too exciting though, and we’ve been getting nothing but soup this whole time!”

“What about bread in the morning?”

“Eh, I wouldn’t really call that a meal. It’s okay, I guess, but a real meal needs meat. This place’s soup has more vegetables and other stuff than meat.”

Looking at her canines every time she opened her mouth, it was sort of fitting for her to have these preferences, but the more I thought about it, the more I wondered if it was really just a preference. Tomas eat a lot more than Soras, but otherwise, our diets aren’t any different. Was this perhaps not the same for Shinrins?

“What about bread with jam?” My mouth almost watered at the thought of its sweetness. “It’s always been my favorite food here.”

“What’s *jam*?”

“They didn’t give that to you? They should have. It’s like...” I’d never really thought of how to explain everyday items to someone who’d never seen them before. “I suppose it’s similar in texture to that medicine you used on me.”

“That sounds kinda nasty.”

“Well, it’s made out of fruit so it’s actually rather sweet. Tomorrow is the seventh day, so now that you’re a Cog as well, they should give it to you sometime in the evening. Usually, you can go grab some at the mess hall a few hours before the nightly roll call.”

“Hmm... I guess I’ll try some. Still, it won’t be the same if we don’t get to eat it together. You’re gonna be stuck in that infirmary place, right?”

“I will be, but—”

“Then I’ll wait until you get out and then we can eat it together!” It was such an illogical yet sweet gesture. Before I could tell her that it was fine to eat without me, she asked another question. “How come it’s only given on the seventh day though?”

“Because it’s the day of rest when the Gods expect us to give thanks and take care of ourselves. Before the war, it was said that battles would rarely be fought on that day. Doing so would risk angering the Gods and result in all sorts of consequences. Just because it’s a day of rest doesn’t mean you do nothing all day, but regular work and things like warfare are supposed to be set aside. Didn’t they teach you these things? It’s fairly important to know.”

“Oh you mean when they were lecturing us about that book, right? Yeah, I usually got bored and fell asleep during that. I’m not really interested in that sort of stuff. Now that we gotta wear these face coverings, I guess I don’t have to worry about someone finding me sleeping!”

The girl giggled, but I didn’t find it funny at all knowing the punishment that would have awaited her had she been found out. “Please don’t do that.”

“It’s just a joke. I know you guys are serious about it, but I can’t really understand why. Also, there’s no way I’m gonna fall asleep when I’m surrounded by all those weirdos.” Moving on from her blasphemy, she suddenly changed the topic. “Since we got nothing to do but walk, how ‘bout another question? What’s your favorite color?”

While making our way through the woods, Rosalia proceeded to talk my ear off. She asked many, many, *many*, questions about various things related to the Academy, myself, and the environment around us. There were some things I couldn’t answer because I simply lacked the knowledge or memory for it, but she didn’t seem to mind. As far as I could tell, the questions weren’t all that important for her. She simply wanted to know for the sake of knowing, to better understand the world around her, and I suppose to better understand me as well. As such, I did my best, however, in turn her questions ended up teaching me something interesting when she let out an unexpected observation.

“Y’know, this Academy is big, but I think there’s less people than the one we came from. This place has that huge building in the middle, but everything else is sorta just shacks, little stone buildings, and old houses. Kinda weird, isn’t it? In ours, there were a lot more nice buildings and people from the outside would come in all the time. Some

of them joined and some would just sell stuff. You ever wonder why the two are so different?”

“Wait, there’s another Academy? Are you sure it was the same kind?”

“They worship twelve gods too and I’m pretty sure their holy book was the same. No face coverings or messing with your memories though... At least I think it wasn’t them.”

After such a revelation, I couldn’t even muster a reply. Every moment that I spent conversing with this girl, the more I felt as though I’d been living in some separate reality. “Do you know if there are other ones apart from these two?”

“I can’t really say for sure. I didn’t even know this one existed until I got sent here. There’s gotta be a reason, right?”

“There probably is... What was the other Academy like?”

Just as she had mentioned, the other one was open to outsiders and wasn’t anywhere near as brutal. As far as she could recall, memories weren’t tampered with, beatings weren’t commonplace, and there was much more freedom overall. Upon hearing all of this, I couldn’t help but be envious of those who still lived there as well as pity Rosalia for having been brought here.

As for the land itself, her memory was a bit hazy at times but she remembered differences such as some of the trees having purple leaves, there being vast fields of flowers, the ocean being within viewing distance of their Academy, and the air somehow smelling different. When all of it was put together, it truly set in as to how small my corner of the world was. The few things I’d learned in my brief outings to the nearby forest paled in comparison.

Making our way out of the woods, I noticed we’d more or less exited from the same point we’d entered. It was remarkable she’d done so well given the fact that this was her first time here. Perhaps she simply had a good memory or sense of direction. Whatever the case was, we’d ended up near the chapel once more. I wanted to show her the inside, but I decided against it given that she didn’t have her hood. Aside from that, we’d already taken enough detours for one day.

“By the way, you were feeling hungry before, right? We can stop and get a snack before meeting my sister. It’ll only take a second.”

“I know we can scavenge for some fruit, but I’m not really in any condition to do that right now. Once we’re done meeting with your sister, we can eat together at the mess hall before I head to the infirmary.”

“Huh? I didn’t notice any fruit out here. What does it even look like?” She asked rather inquisitively as she looked up at the trees. “I wasn’t really thinking about fruit. It’s sorta scary to just try things randomly since you never know what’s safe and what isn’t. Y’know there was this one time I ate some berries I found and it made me throw up. You should’ve seen—”

“I’d rather not hear about that.” I said, cutting her off to avoid the imagery. “If you’re not thinking of fruit, then what are you suggesting?”

“Follow me.” She answered with a mischievous grin.

I had a bad feeling but followed regardless. She led me further down to a path I’d never noticed before. It wasn’t really a path, like the main one, but you could tell that it was still fairly trafficked as a thin line of bare dirt cut through where there should be nothing but grass. I’d never noticed it before despite coming to the chapel fairly often. Following the path with Rosalia, we eventually found a building that was placed so close to the edge of the woods that it was well hidden from where most people would be looking. It was a small wooden building that had no windows, likely recently built given its good condition. Standing near the door, there was a strong smell that came from inside. It was both sweet and savory, as well as a bit floral. My mouth began to water and my stomach growled more loudly than before.

“What is this place?” I asked, trying to quiet my stomach.

“I thought you’d know.” Not really caring to guess, she put her hand on the handle to the door. “It’s got some really good stuff inside. Come on in and take a look!”

Before I could stop her, she’d already opened the door. The light from the outside flooded the room and showed us the treasures lying within. Above were dried meats hanging on racks as well as unlit candles that were held on shelves. Shining in the

corner of the room were an assortment of golden plates and goblets. As soon as I saw these things together, the realization of what this building was struck me.

“Wait, Rosalia, don’t touch any of that! These are all offerings meant for the Gods!”

“Really? The food too? But it's not like they’ll notice if we take just one thing, right? I’ve been sneaking out at night and taking stuff from these little rooms since we got here. You’re freaking out over nothing. I’m sure not even your gods will care. I mean, if they love us then they won’t mind sharing a little bit, right?” She emphasized her point by grabbing a hunk of meat and taking a large bite out of it. A bit of food flew out of her mouth as she continued speaking while chewing. “If nobody’s realized it's gone, then that just means they have too much or they don’t care as much as you think they do.”

“It doesn’t matter what your reasoning is, it’s wrong. Moreso, we’ll be in a lot of trouble if they find us here.”

“Then we’ll hurry up and go. Here, have a little and quit worrying so much!”

She handed me a piece of dried meat that I hesitantly took. I could tell from the unique scent that it had been spiced with something I’d never encountered before. Was this part of what those in the higher ranks ate? I don’t remember food like this being used as an offering.

“What's wrong?” She asked while looking up at me. “If you don’t wanna take it, I get it. You can put it back if you’re scared your gods will get angry or whatever. Either way, we can’t stick around so make a choice.”

“I know it’s just—”

“C’mon, I’m not gonna push you to do it. I just wanted to show you a place I found where there’s food in case you ever wanted some. Kinda like how you showed me your spot.” She reassured me with a smile and patted my back. “You’re not really the kind of person that could do this easily, huh? It’s alright, let’s go meet my sister and then we can eat some soup together.”

Even if it didn’t feel as wrong to steal from a place with so much abundance, I couldn’t convince myself that it wasn’t sinful. Rosalia didn’t seem to believe in the

Gods as I did. For her it was easy to take from here, but I continued to struggle as I fought between my morales and hunger.

I noticed her head suddenly snap to the direction of the door, but before I could react, I suddenly felt the wind leave my lungs. A sickening pop in my ribs sent a wave of panic throughout my body as I was sent careening into a wooden barrel. The overwhelming pain and confusion left me stunned. A moment later, I felt a weight lift off of me as my attacker stood up. Stepping over me, he began searching for Rosalia.

As I laid on the floor gasping for air, I managed to catch a glimpse of the man's uniform. He was a Sora Overseer. Rosalia had been wrong. They'd noticed and they must have been watching these offering rooms, maybe even from the sky in order to stay out of view. As the man walked around the room, I spotted Rosalia huddled in a space between two large boxes. Right as he went to move one of them to search, Rosalia lunged out from underneath and swiped at his face. The Overseer let out an anguished yell. Blood was gushing from his eye as he staggered backward, tripping on a small crate and landing on his back.

Reaching my hand out, I tried begging Rosalia for help but not a word would come out of me. Even so, I saw that she noticed me. There was a brief pause as if she were deciding on what to do. Her glowing eyes darted back and forth between me and the exit. Just as she was about to open her mouth, the man began getting up from the floor. Without another thought spared toward me, she turned her back, scrambling out the door as the man chased after her. Left in shock, all I could do was watch as the light from the door began to dim.

She's going to go get something to help me, right?

She'll return soon, won't she?

I needed to run away while I still could. Grabbing what remained of the caved in barrel, I managed to get up on one knee. The pain only got worse, but I pushed on regardless. Trying to get my other leg to cooperate, I suddenly felt the wood snap from beneath my grasp. Once more, I was sent falling to the floor, wracked with such pain

that I could no longer muster the will to move. I began silently pleading to the Gods, asking for forgiveness and begging for help.

With one last burst of strength I tried to crawl, however, my vision was starting to fail me as the color drained from my surroundings. Before I could even come close to the door, I felt a hand grab me by the collar. Dragging me upward, the Sora from before looked at me through his torn hood. His eye was partially gouged and blood still wept from his wound.

“One who defiles the Gods’ offerings deserves no mercy in this world. You’ve let gluttony drive you to do such terrible things, young sinner.” Tightening his grip to the point of choking me he continued. “Only the Gods will be able to decide if you’re worthy of repentance in this life.”

Striking my cheek with his fist, the Sora let go and allowed me to fall back to the floor. Once more I saw the dim light of the entrance, but only for a moment. In the next one, a shadow flashed toward me, that of his boot slamming into my head. There was a loud ringing in my ears. Then all together, nothing...