

The Cogs of Gods

Book One

Rebirth and Revolution

Anemyre

Thank you to all the people who have supported and given me strength during the darkest times.

I always look forward to celebrating our brightest moments together.

You may never know the boundless love I have for you all, but I pray that in some way it will always reach you.

Chapter I

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*, but that wasn't it. 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 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 simply 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 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 seemed to wake up and began looking around, obviously confused by their current situation. Seeing that the children weren't responding to 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 them out of the room and closed the door. 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.

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 this 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 into 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, if only for a moment. 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 into it 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 floor being hard and cold, since it was made of some form of stone, the warmth of 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 with the white cog on the 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, a 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, however, 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 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 *five*.

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*. That being said, much of it was kept vague and I was never sure if it was because parts were missing or if they were being withheld.

The War of Damnation, which goes by some other names such as *The Great War of Ending*, *The Final War*, or simply, *The War of the Gods*, 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 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. 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 arm band bore a similarity to the old man's, however, their identification numbers were in regular script and sewn from white thread. 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. The old man was in charge of teaching us new recruits, however, he told us that only those that proved themselves exemplary were ever allowed to step foot in that church.

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 Austacia 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 tell us more than he had.

Perhaps that was the point of this short education, leaving 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 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 humanity 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 will 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 brutally 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 the 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, 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 that 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, however, 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 like stop bleeding with pressure and bandages. You would also take turns with others in having them stitch your wound and then stitching it yourself.

For wounds that bled heavily, or were serious, it would depend on how bad it truly was. If the bleeding wasn't life threatening, for example, then the instructor would step in and guide one of us in advanced aid while the rest watched. This would involve creating a makeshift 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. On that day, I'd been the unfortunate subject of a demonstration on how to stitch a cut wound. It wasn't deep, but it was large enough to require my skin to be sewn back together. Once a demonstration like this was over, you would be sent to the infirmary so they could ensure everything was properly taken care of. I was nearly done having some poorly done stitches re-made when a Sora came bursting through the door.

"Attention Medics! A recruit will be coming in shortly and needs immediate help. 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 and 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 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 a bow 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 all this time.

Why am I still alive?

Chapter II: 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 is meant for us and instead of bringing joy, it fills 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 given to the most zealous and dedicated Cogs. They seemed to strike fear into everyone that crossed their paths. 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 which was of course surrounded by a cog. Their identification number was below in regular script and most of the ones I saw had fairly low numbers 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 and 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, however, the entirety of the building seemed to be bathed in light.

I've 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. Until now, 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 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 in front of me, but the Tomas made that impossible. Even so, I could tell something was happening as a loud noise filled the hallway. At first a clanging of metal, and then the distinctive sound of metal 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, but a loud sound came booming out into the hallway as if some massive metal object had been hit against the wall. It shook the building itself and seemed to have not been purposeful considering that the guards seemed surprised as well. 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, the choice was forced upon me 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 for me 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. It also resulted in everyone trying to remain as silent as possible in order to not cause trouble for themselves.

Most people seemed to be moving in a certain direction, however, 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 lighting 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. Anytime someone coughed or cleared their throat, it travelled across the entire room.

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 featureless. They did not have any engraving or special work done on them. 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. Without realizing it, I'd unconsciously traveled toward where everyone else was. 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 thirty paces of them, stopping at the last pillar before the clearing where the crowd gathered. As soon as a gap appeared in the gathering, 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 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 pit. 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, *me*. 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.

Although 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 looked. 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 long.

I kept myself busy by whispering a few short prayers to the Gods when suddenly the same metallic noise from before deafeningly boomed from the walls as it 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, however, 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 surreal as it was, a giant platform slowly descended 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 in our food or work us to death. There's no good reason to think they'd kill us like this and yet I can't stop my heart from racing.

The constant clanking of the chain didn't help my mental state. The sound only reinforced the idea that the final minutes of my life were potentially slipping 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 truly 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, and to make it stranger, it was decorated. Such touches of personality were basically unseen amongst regular members. It reminded me heavily of the Chaplain's robes, however, 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 wrapped around the top of their helms as if they were crowns.

Although I knew that they were nothing more than puppets for the Academy, 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 guards 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 reward 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 the speaker.

“...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 more so to accomplish your task. It is possible, however, that you may find yourself injured to the point of being unable to continue your task. 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 guards 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, but a trial like this was not on my mind.

I now found myself surrounded by both Soras and Tomas. Although they’d likely be 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 combat if possible 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 without any weapons was basically impossible.

Don’t let pride get you killed.

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, I shouldn't shame myself with the way I accomplish it. As ridiculous as I may look, this is for my own sake.

While waiting for the number of Soras fighting to dwindle before I moved, a sudden loud yell came from behind as two brawling Soras came close to slamming into me. They were locked in each other's grasps, flying straight ahead blindly as they fought desperately to incapacitate the other before crashing into something. 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 falling to 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 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 boy finally 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 hope he didn't feel any of that.

Quite unexpectedly, a group of Sora guards descended from the shadows and cleared the area of other Cogs. 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 complete 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 put weight on it, I realized it had only been badly bruised. Taking a chance to catch my breath, I felt the fatigue of what I'd just been through suddenly catch up to me. Letting myself fall backward, I felt the nice cold ground chill my overheated body as I savored every second of this respite. Although I wasn't entirely safe, the area seemed quiet enough to rest for a bit longer than I originally planned on.

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. This level of darkness, where I could barely even see myself, and the way I was far from the fighting as well, was perfect.

Although I wasn't sure if anyone followed me, it mattered little as they'd be just as blind as I was. With so many others out and about still fighting, it also made no sense to wander around this area

and attack someone who was clearly a Sora... Then again, the foreigners might also be like us as well. If one of them had happened to attack me, would I have even known?

Did they have their own objective?

What if hiding only makes me more suspicious to my own peers?

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, just to see 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 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, I'll just be replaced by another. 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 clear 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 place. 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.

Chapter III:

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 reeled with questions and concerns 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 by my action. 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 creature 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 each other.

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. As soon as I stopped moving, it suddenly broke into a sprint away from me. Caught off-guard, I took to the air and followed while cautiously closing in. Looking behind, the creature 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 tumbled into view. The sight I saw before me left me in complete shock.

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 run towards 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.

I suppose he really was a young boy. What a stupid idea it was to chase after him like that. He's got to be one of the youngest children I've come across. 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 knelt down and offered my hand to him.

“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?

However he came to be here, it’s a miracle he survived for so long. 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 his people are this small, 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 doubt that’s all he can do.

Although I was quite curious about him, I didn’t quite like how much he was staring 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?”

What a stupid question to ask!

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 distracted. 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 asked, 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.”

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, there’s nothing cowardly about my strategy. I still put myself in danger while minimizing my risk. It’s a sensible plan. The boy is just being 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? Maybe we shouldn’t be so loud.”

I wasn’t sure if I wanted this boy so close to me, but what threat could he realistically pose? As he slowly came 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 a shout erupt from closeby.

“I FOUND YOU!”

A Toma suddenly charged past me and grabbed the boy who had similarly been caught off guard. He must have been looking out towards the fighting as well and been spotted. Still, this is my fault as well. I shouldn't have let my guard down. 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 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 to it rather tightly. Annoyed at this, the Toma brought him closer, 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. It definitely wasn't from a punch. 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.

Quickly regaining his footing, 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 struggling 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 pull 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, it almost seemed to be 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?

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 a struggle 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... at peace?

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 one time, I'm glad I could feel proud of myself.

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 suppose 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 regular 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. Finishing one side, the boy got up and moved to the other. Once he was done, he wiped his hands on my hood as though it were a rag.

"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'd found some feeling of normalcy. I was never exactly sure what would happen tomorrow, 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 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 thought I could help 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. Still, 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. Give it a bit more time and he'd likely be dead."

"Huh?! 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. Am I going to 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 snapped back into reality by a flood of warmth emanating from my chest. It was as if someone had set a small fire from inside of 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 cried out in surprise.

“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, however, 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 question 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 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 words, she was very careful in the way she handled me. It was almost akin to a broken clay 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 grass all around me. Near to me, 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?"

"I—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 if 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, however, 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... and inexperience. I hope I’m making some sense?”

“Kinda...” 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. Anyways, 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 the girl 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 back 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?

Chapter IV 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 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 that was vanished. Could it really have been a miracle? 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. Unlike the Champions, these guards weren't armed with lethal weapons. 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 caught my attention were still her eyes. In the darkness they were like bright 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 moreso 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 more than likely they were 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. 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 Supporter 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 combat 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 know this."

"I... Please don't try and scare me, okay? I barely came here and everything is weird. You guys are so extreme with your religion that it makes me think everything you're saying might be true. Please just tell me this is a bad joke."

"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."

"I'm not stupid!" She realized how loud she'd raised her voice and quickly calmed herself. "I know something weird is 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." Although I didn't want to avoid answering, I wanted to tell her the truth. "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.”

“You know what? 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 during it. 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 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 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 only the size of my palm and were fairly easy to pick. Although I felt a bit of guilt in removing it, 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?”

“Err, 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? 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 forced to suddenly sit. “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*. Although, I suppose once we get our four digit number I might run into my replacement...”

“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’ll 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 unenthused 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."

Chapter V

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. What she's going to say or do keeps catching me by surprise. 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, are you 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 whatever 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 what's 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 actually 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?”

Once more, I was caught off-guard by her spontaneity but I did my best to play along. 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. More than anything, she seemed to simply be a curious person as well. She wanted to know for the sake of knowing and better understanding the world around her. 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 like 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, more of a *shed* as she had mentioned before. Unlike the old cabin that was old and rotten, this one seemed recently built. 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. The smell coming from it made my mouth water. I could tell from the unique scent that it had been spiced with something I'd never had

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, it still felt wrong to do in the first place. Rosalia didn't seem to believe in the Gods as I did. For her it was easy to take from here, but I couldn't bring myself to do the same. With my mouth still watering, I put the food back down.

"Look out!" Her voice suddenly called out before I 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. I didn't want to die here. I didn't want this to be where it all ends.

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 of my collar 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...

Chapter VI

Mercy

I awoke some time later. It was hard to tell exactly how much time had passed, but my lips were now cracked from a terrible thirst. I had no idea what this place was. The floor was rough and cold. It was likely made of stone, but it was so dark that I couldn't tell if this was a room or somewhere outside. From the corner of my eye, I could spy a faint light, but I couldn't move my head to see where it was coming from. Any attempt to move from my current position was far too painful. I was stuck on my back with my face staring into an endless abyss.

Lying there, I felt a dull ache every time my heart would beat. It was as if moving the blood in my veins had become a labored process similar to breathing. In this horrid state, my only solace was that the cold floor felt nice against my swollen cheek. As more time passed, my thoughts only became more occupied by death. It wasn't just the pain causing this, I felt a coldness emanating from within. It was as if the fire of my soul had been reduced to fading embers. Of all the bad times in my brief life, this was the first where I felt completely hopeless. How could I ever possibly make it out of this situation? I've lost what little I had. The only consolation I could cling to was knowing that my body wouldn't last much longer.

Looking back, it's been a short life of nothing but pain and humiliation. I'm so confused as to why I was even born in the first place. Was this always meant to be my fate? If so, I'm glad it will be over soon. I'm tired... Tired of being afraid, of always hiding, of being struck and abused when I poke my head out. I used to think a lot about the ideas of *freedom* and *happiness*. I used to want them more than anything, save for a friend so I wouldn't be so alone. Now I don't want any of that. I just want to die and be erased from this world.

If what they taught me is true, then the light of another soul being snuffed out means nothing these days. This world is no different than I am. We're both dying. Every fire will eventually fade and then the world will freeze over. What other future is there?

It's been more than a hundred years since that war and we're still fighting to continue our existence, and for what exactly? To get beat down by a new problem that will eventually pop up yet again? To get our daily bread only for us to grow hungry again the next day? It feels like a cycle of endless suffering. It's pointless. If life was always meant to be like this, then should I not be glad that it's coming to an end?

As I felt the blood pumping from my chest, to my fingers, and to my swollen cheek, I prayed that soon my heart would begin to slow to an eventual rest. I was sick of this pain. Even in these final moments, my prayers were unheard. Nothing I do or say to the Gods ever mattered, did it?

The Gods were never listening in the first place.

The pain continued and worsened until a groan escaped me that sounded more like a long whining sound. It hurt so much and yet it only continued to worsen. More than just physical agony, I felt a deep spiritual torture upon realizing my fear of dying alone was coming true. All those careful plans of mine, all the effort I put in, all thrown to the wind at the first sign of someone who noticed me. Was I so wrong in simply not wanting to be alone? Did I commit such a great sin in wanting companionship that the Gods had to punish me in such an atrocious way?

Why?

As my prayers continued to remain unanswered, I began to grow angry with the Gods. Why was I being treated so cruelly? Was stealing food from those with an abundance such a grave sin? If so, then why make me hungry? Why make me suffer if I'm going to be punished for my reaction? Why give me life in the first place if this is how you were going to treat me?

No matter if I ranted in my mind or aloud, it was always met with silence. I would die here and nobody would notice except for the person who'd have to remove my body. My spirit will leave this shell, and this world altogether. All of my questions will remain unanswered. When I stand before the Gods, what will they say to me? Will they have answers?

Will they even care?

What if they truly left and never spared a thought about us afterward? It would explain why none of our prayers were ever answered. It would explain the state of the world and why everyone was so cruel. For the first time, I'd thought my prayers had been answered, but in reality it was just another twist of the knife.

You're a delusional fool.

Perhaps then, it's my fault. I allowed myself to be crushed this way. These delusions that things would get better, why did I not accept the truth from the start? There is *nothing* for me here. I am *nothing*. When I die, *nothing* will await me.

Nothingness seems to be the conclusion and yet there still remained a shred of fear within me. Why? If *nothing* can change and if *nothing* awaits me, then there is no *thing* for me to fear, and yet... I'm terrified.

Do you really want to die?

No living thing does, and yet I feel so hopeless. Living is painful, but I'm terrified of death. I don't want to die here, alone, in some dark place.

Nobody deserves to die like this.

As my eyes began to close, a strange sensation began to overtake me as though I were floating on a calm body of water. Ever so slowly, the pain began to melt away as the soothing grasp of slumber caressed me. Maybe my body was beginning to accept that I'd lost this fight before my mind did.

Still, if I die, will there really be nothing for me? I don't want to disappear. Even this existence is better than ceasing to exist. Slowly, my thoughts began to halt and yet a question still remained in my mind.

Why was I here?

Eyes growing heavier, I finally closed them. Instead of darkness, I saw wide blue skies and green fields with flowers. A place where no one could stop me from flying wherever I pleased. A place where there was no hunger or pain. At night, there would be a bed for me to lay on and eat warm bread with jam. It would be a soft and clean bed too. The skies would always have a few clouds for me to watch, but never too many to block out the sun. There would be birds to sing and little squirrels to scamper up the trees and scurry about the floors. Every day I could live like this and then... and then I'd still be alone wouldn't I?

What even makes you happy?

Did you ever even know?

I couldn't answer these questions. Something that girl had said stuck with me, even now. All this time I'd been searching for happiness and yet I've never heard my own laughter. I can barely envision my face, much less how it would look like smiling. I've lived like this for so long that happiness became more of a concept than something I thought I could actually achieve. Why?

You don't really know what happiness is, do you?

Why does that bother me so much? It shouldn't. I'm dying. What point is there in worrying about it now? It's pointless. It's useless. It's...

Infuriating.

I hate admitting to myself that it was all meaningless. I went through so much and yet it was all for nothing?

I can't accept this.

I should be embracing my death and yet I can't. I'm beyond infuriated. I don't even know the word for it. I deserve better than this. Even the people who did this to me likely won't suffer half as much as I did, that girl included.

She abandoned you.

If the roles had been reversed, I would have helped her. Actually, that's *exactly* what I'd already done. I risked my life for her and she didn't do the same when the time came. No amount of smiles and promises of friendship are worth anything if you left me to die.

Traitor.

Ingrate.

Disloyal.

Useless.

You never needed her.

My trust has been abused. My sacrifices were in vain, but *I*... even if it's just me, I should honor myself. Even if nobody knows or sees me, *I* do. I shouldn't let others treat me like this. The Academy, that girl, even the Gods themselves don't appreciate anything I've ever done for them. I only have *myself* in this world. Just me and *I*.

That may just be how life will go from now on. Loneliness hurts in its own way, like a wound that only gets worse with time, but maybe I've simply not learned how to heal it yet. Or perhaps I have to just get used to the pain instead. Whatever the case, I don't want to open myself to betrayal again. I'm not an idiot who refuses to learn from experience.

Someday I'll look back on this as nothing more than a terrible memory. Until then, I have to make it through this night. When tomorrow comes, I'll do the same again. Night after night, until I'm strong enough to bear the weight of the world once more. Perhaps one day I can stop just *surviving* and learn how to *live* instead...

Chapter VII

Bitter Medicine

I had closed my eyes for what felt like only a minute. Upon opening them, I found myself in an entirely new area. There was no dark abyss or frigid air, only a room that was faintly lit by the gentle light of a distant fire. I was lying on what felt like a wooden slab with a blanket covering me. The pain and breathing issues from before were still present but to a much lesser degree. Clearly I wasn't dead, but many things had happened without me knowing.

In addition to my previous fortunes, it seems that I've regained some of my movement. I was able to turn my head and notice that the wooden slab I was lying on appeared to actually be a table. Around me were traces of blood and on a nearby chair there was a dirty bucket of water with stained rags hanging from it. Were it not for my improved condition, this would be a more concerning sight. As far as I could tell, someone had actually given me aid in order to save my life. Still, what exactly had been done? More importantly, who would have wanted to save me? It seems I was now indebted to some unknown savior.

Seeing nothing familiar, I attempted to sit up. It was a slow process that made my whole body ache, but eventually I managed to push through the pain. In the distance, I could see a strange piece of furniture and what appeared to be a fireplace, or at least the glow that came from it. This place was so different from my barrack, but it didn't feel entirely foreign either.

The thought just occurred to me, but how am I meant to get off this table? In my condition, I'll be unable to bring out my wings to avoid a potential fall. A Sora as injured as I am often loses their ability to fly. Given my vulnerable state, I gripped the table for dear life while slowly dangling my legs over the edge. The creaking of the wood sent a bead of sweat down my forehead as I had flashbacks to that wooden barrel collapsing beneath me. My legs could almost touch the ground from here, but even a small drop would be horrifically painful right now. Scooting closer to the edge, I prepared myself for the coming agony and, with gritted teeth, pushed myself off. As my feet slapped the floor, a wave of relief hit me when I realized it didn't hurt nearly as much as I expected. Whoever had healed me had done a great job. Then again, there's a chance I'm simply getting used to it at this point. Whatever the case, the table hadn't buckled beneath me and I was finally touching the floor. With how rotten my luck had been until now, this felt like its own victory.

As I took my first step, I quickly had to brace myself on the table to keep from falling over. My body was so stiff. All of my muscles were tight, especially those in my legs. Trying to stretch, I lifted an arm upward, but a strange sensation immediately froze me in place. Something was pulling on my skin. Carefully, I ran my fingers along my body and realized what I thought had been rags were bandages. Beneath them, I could feel something else. While rubbing my finger back and forth over the bandages, I

came to the conclusion that they were stitches based on past experience. The only issue is that I don't remember having any open wounds before coming here. Was I cut open?

Knowing this made the most sense sent a chill throughout my body. As I began to shiver, I realized part of this reaction was simply from physical coldness. Although the room wasn't frigid, I didn't have anything covering the top half of my body. Everything, save for my foot wraps and pants, had been taken. Looking around, I didn't see any sign of my jacket or hood. Actually, it was only now that I realized these weren't my original footwraps either. It seemed as though they'd been swapped for thicker ones in order to protect me from the cold. I was surprised by the caring gesture and further shocked to see that they were brand new as well. I've never had new clothing of any sort, so the appearance and feel of these footwraps was a pleasant change. Glad as I was for this, the disappearance of my clothes left me with nothing but a blanket to throw over my bare upper body.

I'd only managed a few steps before a wave of fatigue and dizziness nearly dropped me to the floor. How could such a simple action affect me like this? Was I ill? Seeing as I didn't have a fever or any other symptoms, I suppose whatever had been done left me in this state. Normally, it would be proper to rest, but I was too thirsty and hungry to lie down. Not to mention, I wouldn't be able to relax unless I knew what was happening.

With my legs feeling weak, I held the blanket around me with one hand while using the other to guide me in the dim light, holding onto random objects as I made my way towards the fireplace. It was hard to tell what I was grabbing in the dark, but I cared little at this point. The only things on my mind were food and water. If I could acquire neither, then, at the very least, I wanted to be warm. Hopefully by morning, whoever had been caring for me would find me and bring some food.

My journey to the fireplace couldn't have been more than fifteen paces and yet I felt as though I'd just run up a steep hill. By the time I neared the fireplace, I was breathing heavily from the exertion. I rested my hand on the strange piece of furniture that had been blocking the light of the fire. Whatever this thing was, it seemed to be made of wood and covered in soft furs. It was hard to describe it. The best I could think of was a mix between a bed and a bench.

The strange piece of furniture wasn't the focus of my attention however, what had caught my eye was the woman who was sleeping on it. She wasn't wearing a hood or any part of her uniform. Her shoulders and arms were exposed and she slept quite peacefully. The blanket that covered her had slipped off to reveal her strange outfit. It was like a thin white cloth that had frilly designs and seemed to be made of something soft as it conformed to her body.

How beautiful.

She seems so soft...

While the sight of another person without their uniform would have been enough to capture my interest, it was her looks that utterly captivated me. I felt my cheeks become flush and yet I wasn't

embarrassed, nor was it from the strain of standing. Could someone's appearance alone stir me to such a strange response?

Although it was disrespectful to simply stare at her like this, it was hard to stop myself from doing so. Getting a better look at her face, I noticed she had more of a slender face than Rosalia. Her lips also seemed to be more plump and were perfectly formed. Her skin was light but not anywhere close to pale. I only have one person to compare her to, but the only thing they really share in common is their hair color. Although, I suppose that wasn't really too similar either. Rosalia's was a brighter red while this woman's hair was darker, closer to the shade of blood. Like a wildflower, she seems to have popped up in the strangest of places. Then again, I suppose I'm the one that's out of place in this situation... and also rather strange myself considering I'm watching her sleep.

Is she the one who saved me? If so, I owe her an immense debt of gratitude. For her to have healed me to this extent must mean she's a very skilled healer. A person such as her is likely an instructor of other Medics or perhaps in charge of caring for important members of the Academy. It's the only thing that makes sense given the environment I've found myself in. That being said, it raises even more questions as to why someone like her would bother saving an unremarkable Cog such as me. Seeing as she's sleeping, the best thing to do would be to leave her as she is. It's only right for me to not disturb her...

But I'm hungry

And thirsty

And... I want to get a closer look at her.

I know I shouldn't do this and yet I can't help it. What's with this sudden dangerous level of curiosity? It's like a burning that's spreading through every part of my body. It seems to override my common sense and self-preservation. Why am I unable to resist this obvious error in judgment?

By now I was hovering over her, heart beating rapidly. A part of me almost wanted to touch her cheek to see if she was truly real. She seemed so perfect and still in her sleep. I fought this impulse, but against my will I was beginning to fall closer to her. At first I wondered if this feeling could truly be so powerful, however, I soon realized that something was physically wrong with me. Bright lights came into my vision as the corners blackened with every beat of my heart. Why was I suddenly fainting? My blood felt as though it drained from my head and in the next moment I fell forward, only saving myself at the last moment by catching hold of the furniture. My quick reaction prevented injury, but to my horror I'd also shaken the woman awake by doing this.

Quickly and without warning, the woman pulled a knife from seemingly nowhere and held it to my throat. Were it not for her careful handling of the weapon, I would have impaled myself on it as my legs suddenly gave out. Catching me in her arms, I quickly regained enough strength to sit myself down. The adrenaline, mixed with my body suddenly failing me, sent my thoughts into disorder. The woman seemed quite angry at me, but at the very least she'd put the knife away.

“What the hell are you doing?” She demanded to know as she got up and stood in front of me. Despite how bad this all seemed, I couldn’t help but keep staring at her. Even when she looked at me with utter contempt, she still retained a beauty the likes of which rendered me mute. “Are you going to answer me?”

The silence that followed was long, but it gave me the time to collect my wits. Trying desperately to explain my actions, I did my best to inform her without outing myself as a strange person. “I-I was trying to find out where I was.” The woman remained silent as I turned away out of fear that she’d see through me. Not hearing a word, I turned just enough to see her from the corner of my vision. Her eyes were glaring at me, obviously she didn’t believe me at all. She had every right to be angry after being woken up in such a way, but I was hoping for a bit of mercy. Noticing her continued silence, I simply decided to continue speaking and hope I appeased her at some point. “I’m sorry for waking you. I just... well, I felt rather dizzy and weak. I suppose I still do, but I didn’t mean to nearly fall on you like that. Honestly, I—”

“What were you even trying to do?”

“I... I was trying to figure out who you were. Your lack of a uniform caught me off-guard. It’s already rare enough when I see someone without their hood on. After walking all the way over here I started feeling faint. I was going to wake you but ended up falling over instead.”

“And that was *all* you were doing?”

“What else would I be doing?” I answered back, unsure if she knew more than she was letting on.

She rolled her eyes and let out a sigh before leaning in closer to the point where I could feel her breath as she spoke.

“Why aren’t you looking me in the eyes when you speak? You know that’s the sign of a liar, right?”

Even if I wasn’t omitting some truth, it’d be hard to look at her without my hood on. Until recently, I’ve never had to really give much thought as to where my eyes were looking. Where exactly was I supposed to look at her? Do I stare into her eyes? Is it rude to look at any other part of her? Gods, this is so stressful. I regret listening to those inane thoughts that popped into my head.

The woman put a finger on my forehead which immediately caused my body to freeze in response. Although I expected her to yell or hit me like the other Cogs, she simply forced me to turn towards her. Instead of expressing anger, she seemed to be enjoying how uncomfortable I was. Staring into her eyes for a moment, I felt a worse discomfort than when I’d done the same with Rosalia. This woman’s gaze seemed to stare right into my soul. Just as I was about to turn away she let out a smile.

“See? It’s not like anything bad is happening to you, right?”

“Right... b-but, I’d rather not do this.”

“And why’s that?”

It was a good question as even I had no idea why this was so. Doing things like this made my heart race, but not out of excitement or fear. As pleasing as it was to look at her, our interaction brought about a feeling of anxiety that made me all too aware of every part of my body. I felt as though any improper movement of my arms, legs, eyes, or any significant portion of me could potentially offend her. On top of it all, I didn't like how she was examining my face. Did I have a strange appearance? Was I unconsciously making a strange face?

Too stressful.

Need to hide myself.

With the face covering I never had to worry about any of these things. Now, however, I couldn't stop thinking about any potential actions. Noticing my lack of a response, the woman made a suggestion to me, "Would you feel better if I brought you your uniform to wear?"

"Yes." I quickly replied.

Before I could breathe a sigh of relief, she began mocking me. "Well too bad. It's rude to not look at people when you speak to them. You really plan on hiding behind a mask your whole life? Or are you just scared of pretty girls?"

"I'm not, I-I just don't see the point. It's a requirement to wear our hoods at all times unless instructed otherwise. I'm just a soldier so I've no use for speaking with others."

She finally pulled away and sat beside me. I didn't face her and simply stared into the fire. When she didn't say anything, I once again turned slightly in her direction until I could barely see her. She was half-laying, half-sitting with her legs bent and feet towards me. It was an odd way to sit and felt overly familiar yet somewhat distant at the same time. I wasn't exactly sure what she was trying to accomplish other than confusing me.

Suddenly, I felt a light pressure on my side that made me instantly jump up in my seat. My body was so sensitive that such a gentle touch was enough to make me overreact. Turning towards her to see what it was, I noticed her bare legs and immediately turned back around. This woman felt dangerous, but I wasn't really in a position where I could leave. Was this really the person that had saved my life? What did she want from me?

"You really don't think of amounting to more than this place? Just going to stay here forever? You ever think about what you'd do if you found yourself outside of the Academy? Not just on a mission, but free to go wherever you wanted."

The question came out of nowhere. Was she testing my loyalty? It seemed a possibility, but this entire situation felt completely foreign to what the Academy would normally do. On top of that, it doesn't seem likely that they'd waste the resources or talent to heal such serious injuries if they weren't sure of my loyalty. Still, if she's acting on her own then what exactly does she expect to gain? Should I be honest with her?

“I don’t see myself leaving.” I answered, still guarded. “Not only is it impossible to leave without permission, I’m not sure if I’d be able to make it outside on my own. It’s not as if I have any memories of my past life or a place to go—”

“Look at me and say that again.”

Despite her command, I refused to look at her. At this point it felt more out of spite than anything. It’s not as if I’m angry with her, but it annoys me that she’s not being straightforward. If you want to command me, then command me. Tell me what it is you want me to say. Her questions and orders feel as though they’re laced with venom. She’s trying to pressure me, but to do what exactly? Not knowing how to counter her deception, I replied with straightforward honesty. “I’d prefer not to look at you.”

“Hm? And why’s that?” Her voice was now filled with an obviously faked sadness. “Do you think I’m so hard to look at? You think I’m ugly, don’t you?”

“That’s not the issue.”

“Then what is the issue?” Her voice suddenly returned to normal, if a bit more stern than before.

“I already told you. We wear a face covering at all times. I’m not used to looking at faces or having others look at mine.”

“Is that *really* the issue or is it only *part* of the issue?”

She stretched out her legs and rested them on my lap. Although she was aggressive in her attempts to get my attention, there was also a strange gentleness to it as well. Could she not just tap my shoulder or something similar? Why the strange behavior?

But is it really that bad?

Her attention is focused on me.

Her eyes are on me alone.

Just as I was going to ask her to stop, I felt something else. Underneath my blanket, something was moving. Lifting it, I saw that the woman had begun trying to worm her bare feet towards my stomach. Although we’d been taught the benefits of huddling together for warmth in cold environments, this didn’t feel like a practical gesture. She was doing this to unsettle me.

As I turned around, I realized I’d fallen for her trap and did just as she’d wanted. Strangely enough, however, she wasn’t looking at me. Instead, she was staring straight ahead at the fire. Had I been reading too deeply into her actions? I was knocked out of my thoughts by the feeling of her cold skin touching my stomach. It was enough to make me flinch which caused a slight chuckle from her. Turning back towards me, she had a mischievous smile on her face.

“You know, it’s really easy to tell what you’re thinking. You’ve got a really expressive face. Has anyone ever told you that?” Her voice was soft and playful now. It was hard to tell if she was being

genuine in her words. Then again, had I been so focused on what she was doing that I let my own face betray me? What else had slipped through my notice?

Growing frustrated by these mind games, I finally just asked her what I'd wanted to know from the start. "What exactly do you want from me?"

"Hm?" She hummed while caressing my stomach with her feet. "I *could* tell you buuuut... I think it'd be more interesting if you told me why you thought you were here."

Such a degrading way of touching someone... This woman is breathtaking and yet this is not the way I wanted attention from her. Trying to get her to explain herself, I gave a non-answer.

"I'm not sure why I'm here."

"Ehhh, that's a boring answer. You're not even trying. Come on, at least try and play along a little." Stopping her strange action, she sat up and leaned over towards me, poking my cheek with her finger. "You've got three chances to guess correctly."

What was going to happen if I guessed incorrectly all three times? I leaned away from her but this only caused her to come closer.

"What? Not enjoying our little skinship? I'm sure a lot of men and boys your age would love to be in your position... You wouldn't prefer a man to be doing this, would you?"

"I wouldn't!" I snapped back, surprised by my own outburst. Seeing her amusement, I quickly calmed myself. "If I guess correctly will you stop this?"

"Does it really bother you that much?" She proceeded to shove her feet underneath my rear in an instant. "Here, is this better then?"

The look of shock on my face caused her to burst out laughing. As embarrassed as I was to have her laugh at me, it was also the first time I was able to see her face clearly thanks to the light of the fire. Quite surprisingly, she wasn't exactly as old as I initially thought. She seemed to be an adult, but barely so. It would be hard to place her above twenty years and most likely she wasn't too much older than me. Her eyes were a deep violet and her hair was long and messy, falling across her face before she brushed it aside. Although she had a youthful appearance on the surface, there was something about her that initially made me think she was older. I just couldn't place what it was. Although I wasn't finished examining her, the woman's eyes suddenly locked back onto me. The pressure she passively put forth made me feel like a mouse in front of a hungry cat.

"What's wrong? Looks like you were going to say something." Her voice feigned innocence, but the same mischievous smile was still on her face. "You know, you've got a pretty handsome face, don't you? I see why that little girl likes you so much."

I could feel my entire body tighten as I realized what this meant. Seeing my surprise, she began inching closer, eventually leaning her hands and chin on my shoulder before I could pull away. Unlike the grappling during our training, her hold on me was gentle, but still felt just as unbreakable. Not

because I couldn't physically break away, but because my body froze from being held onto in such a way. Every breath she took tickled my neck.

It's heaven and hell.

"You shouldn't blame that girl too much for what happened." The woman softly whispered. "She might be a troublemaker, but it's hard to find people that care about you in a place like this."

Confused by what she meant, I turned slightly towards her. It didn't seem as though she were making things up. She wasn't even smiling anymore. If these comments are sincere, then how does she know so much?

"Who are you speaking of?" I asked, hoping to have her confirm my suspicion.

"You're asking the questions now? That's pretty rude considering you didn't even play along with my guessing game. Even worse, you're lying to me again. If I know about your little excursion into the storage shed, then you think I wouldn't know about that girl? I know all about your little Shinrin friend, probably more than you do. Now, if you want me to start answering some questions then I want some guesses from you. I'm curious about how your mind works."

She plainly admitted part of her goal and yet I had no choice but to play along. "I'm assuming you didn't just want a Sora to run errands, did you?"

She pressed her breasts against my arm. Even through the blanket I could feel how soft they were. Despite this, I was doing all I could to stare straight ahead and ignore her obvious provocation.

"You're getting warmer. I *know* that you know why I chose *you* specifically and not some other Cog. Think for a second, kid. I've got access to just about anyone in this Academy, not just prisoners. I'll admit that being imprisoned made it easier since nobody would care about whatever happened to you, but ask yourself, why *you*? Why would I want some boy that's never been proven in the field? Stop dodging the question and be honest... we both know the *real* reason."

She couldn't have alluded to it any harder if she tried. Even so, I wish she could just be upfront and say it. I don't understand her reason for toying with me so much. Is it simply because she enjoys it? That seems likely but...

As scary as she is, she can't see into our mind.

That's right. She has no way of knowing exactly how much I still remember... As strange as it is to receive an answer from myself, at least now I better understand her reasoning. This woman doesn't have all the details, only enough to make fairly accurate guesses.

Finally having a more even playing field, I dismissed some of the ideas she may have had about me. "You think that I wasn't affected by whatever the Academy did to our minds, you're mistaken. To put it simply, whatever they did to me was mostly a success. I truly have no idea who I am or where I came from."

Her playfulness ceased and she seemed genuinely caught off-guard by my response. Leaning closer, in a more aggressive manner, she confronted me on my statement.

“You’re lying aren’t you?”

“I’m not.” For the first time, I looked straight into her eyes.

She showed a slight hint of shock before quickly regaining her composure. Leaving my personal space, she returned to a more normal seated position. The young woman appeared to be in deep thought. Thankfully, this meant a temporary ceasing of provocations.

“How much do you remember?” There was a hint of suspicion in her voice.

“As I said, nothing. I don’t remember who I was, where I came from, who raised me, or what my name even is. My mind is as blank as any of the others here.”

She seemed genuinely puzzled. She bit her lip before mumbling something underneath her breath. The information seemed to bother her.

“I want to say that you’re lying, but it’s not *entirely* outside the realm of possibility for this to happen... It’s just a first. On top of it all, it looks like you’re being honest with me for once.” Breathing a heavy sigh she continued, “When I think about it, this might actually make more sense. I wondered why someone like you had hid from our sights for so long. Usually people who keep their memories make themselves apparent early on. The few who don’t, eventually attempt an escape or... they *break* under the pressure.”

“What do you mean?”

“They kill themselves.” She answered bluntly. “In the best cases, that’s the end result. In the worst ones, they get violent and kill others. It’s not good for morale if people learn about it, so it’s hidden as much as possible. Not too hard since your generation especially follows orders to a fault.”

“What do you mean by my *generation*?”

“The original members didn’t have their minds wiped, and neither did those who joined willingly after. They’re the first generation. You’re part of the late second generation who should be more or less wiped of all their memories. You should have noticed there’s a difference by now.”

“You called me a *late* second generation. Does that imply there’s going to be another one after us? Also, why even do this to us if the Academy was able to exist without it?

“It makes you better soldiers and workers. Less negative traits and more positive ones overall. You end up being more faithful and you have no motives outside of those you’re given. When it works perfectly, your generation makes for ideal Cogs. There are some issues inherent to the process, but the benefits outweigh the risks. The next generation aims to improve on the process and fix issues, like the one you’re experiencing, but it’s not ready yet and who knows if it’ll even work in the first place.”

“How do you know all of this?”

“Because I’ve been here for a while and I’m the best healer they have so I’m in charge of monitoring the health of those going through the process. They never told me what exactly was going on, but it’s not hard to piece it together when you have the major details.” Somehow that didn’t seem to be the full answer, but it was all she was willing to give. “What bothers me though is how you’ve

managed to lose all your memories but not end up as a *blank slate*. It's never really happened before. Over time your generation develops a bit of a unique personality based on individual experiences, but it's never to this extent. You said you were like this from the start?" I nodded my head in response.

"Interesting... I guess I made the right choice."

"What do you mean?"

"You might not be what I expected, but if anything that makes things easier for both of us. Whatever ideals or memories you had in the past won't get in your way now. I'm actually pretty lucky to have found someone like you. It's all the benefits of having a Cog but with none of the drawbacks." A friendly smile suddenly appeared on her face. "How about this? If you work with me, I can get you out of here."

"As in, free from the Academy?"

"There's going to be some things I need your help with first, but after that you're free as a bird."

I was surprised by the offer. Was she genuine in what she was saying? It sounded great on the surface, but what would someone like her want that she didn't already have access to?

"You still haven't explained what you want from me. I'd like to know what I'm agreeing to do."

"That's understandable." She responded, the smile on her face disappearing as her tone became more serious. "Let me fill you in on some of the details you're missing. First off, I'm not a member of this cult. I'm an outsider that was brought in on the promise of payment because of my skills. I'm a healer and this place offered me a safe haven where I could research, be given access to materials I needed, and be left alone for the most part. At first, things were pretty great, but when it came time for me to leave, I learned that they'd lied to me. Even if the rest of our agreement is still being upheld, I've been stuck here for years. Can you imagine wasting your life away in a place like this? I guess you sort of can... That's not the point though. The point is that I want revenge. I want to make them pay for thinking they could get away with using me."

"I think I understand... But what can the two of us realistically do against the Academy? If you're not allowed to leave, then are you planning to escape? If you haven't managed on your own, I fail to see how I can be enough of a boon to shift the odds in our favor, let alone for your plans of revenge."

"We're not the only ones who will be involved, kid. There's three others that are going to be helping."

"I'm not the first person you've recruited into this plan?" There was a hint of disappointment in my voice as I suddenly didn't feel very special.

"One of them is someone I've known for a while now. The other two are friends of yours."

"Friends? Oh, you can't mean..." My mouth almost hung open at the possibility of what she was suggesting.

“I don’t need your little friend. The one I’m interested in is the girl she’s always with.”

“Other girl? Her sister? Why?”

“Huh, I didn’t know they were that close. Either way, the other Academy wants her back. To make a long story short, let’s just say that this Academy used a lot of underhanded means in order to force the other one to hand that girl over. Unlike this group, that Academy is more open to outsiders like me. Best of all, they actually honor their agreements and are likely to pay big money to have her back. Since you’re helping, I’ll give you a cut of the reward on top of the fact that you’ll be free to do whatever you want afterward.”

“What exactly is so special about her?”

“You don’t really need to know, and for now, it’s probably better that you don’t. I’m sure you’ll find out eventually, but adding more complications doesn’t really help us in any way. You understand?”

“If you say so... I’m still confused, however, as to why you needed me in particular.”

She leaned closer to me. I was worried the woman would do something strange again, but her face was quite serious. She held up three fingers and with her other hand pointed to her first one.

“The first reason I chose you is that you’re a Sora. Put simply, you’re useful for a lot of things when it comes to traveling. Second, your mind is still intact, so that means you’re not a slave to the Academy and once we’re out of here you’ll be able to interact with others normally.” She moved onto her final finger and looked me straight in the eye. “The third, and most important reason, is pure luck on your part. During the ceremony, you made contact with that Shinrin girl which means she already knows you. Considering everything that’s happened, you can use her guilt as leverage to get her cooperation. Once you get that done, her *sister* will tag along since the two seem close.”

She’d been paying close attention to all of us, but when did she start investigating me? I tried to think back to anyone that seemed suspicious and all at once I realized who she was. The realization must have been clear on my face as she seemed confused by my reaction.

“You’re the Medic who treated me in the auditorium?”

“What? Did it take you this long to realize that? It should have been obvious. How the hell did you think I knew so much about you? You caught my attention the moment I saw the two of you together.”

“Ah... that explains quite a lot. I assume afterwards is when you used your position to find out more about us.”

“Now you’re catching on. Maybe you’re not a complete lost cause after all.”

Trying to avoid further embarrassment, I moved onto another question. “What will happen once we get to that other Academy? Will those girls be forced to remain there?”

“Why do you care? Or are you the type that forgives easily? Aww, aren’t you a little sweetheart.” The same mocking tone as before was only made worse when she reached over and pinched my cheek.

Before I could move her hand away she pulled back. “Normally I’d tell you that you’re an idiot for forgiving someone like that, but in this instance it’d be a good idea to not have bad blood with them. At the very least, I just want you to not actively antagonize them. Can you do that?”

“I’d prefer to never see the Shinrin again, but if we have to work with them, I can manage.”

“Good. In case you’re curious, the other Academy is very different from this one. That place might get their weird ideas from the same book, but they have different ways of going about their beliefs. Believe it or not, their members join willingly. The world is a harsh place and they offer a level of stability that’s hard to come by. As far as I know, the other Academy only wants to study her. I doubt they’d harm her, if that’s what worries you.”

As much as I didn’t like Rosalia, the other girl was innocent in this situation. I felt guilty in having to rope her into this mess. Then again, if what this woman is saying is true, then it’d be an improvement over staying here. The only major issue I had with this plan now was having to speak to Rosalia again. If possible, I would have wanted to avoid her for the rest of my life. What would she do if I rejected her offer now? Would this woman allow me to leave now that I knew so much about her plot against the Academy? I have a feeling she’d just end up throwing me back into that prison... or *worse* considering how sensitive this information is. With the illusion of choice dispelled, I really only had one way to proceed.

“I understand what you want me to do, but what of the escape itself? The Academy is heavily guarded and it’s already nearing winter. Even if we succeed, I can’t imagine the other one is nearby considering you need a boat to get here.”

“Oh? How do you know about that? Sounds like you have some information that you shouldn’t.” She almost sounded impressed. “I’ll explain all of it tomorrow. I’m tired and you need your rest too. I’m going to have to keep healing you every night if we want you in decent condition before we leave. Once the others show up we’ll have a meeting, or something similar, depending on the circumstances.”

“Rosalia and the others are going to be here tomorrow? I didn’t expect to see her again so soon...”

“Well well, looks like you even know her name. Like it or not, I need you two to get along well enough to have them work with us. If you have trouble with the wolf girl then try the other one. Whatever you decide on, it’s your job to get it all under control tomorrow. Anyways, like I said, I’m tired so leave any other questions or comments ‘til morning.”

With the conversation having finished, she stood up and gave a big yawn. I remember that strange power of hers making her fatigued. She must have been using that same thing to keep me from dying. As strange as she was, I’m grateful for all she did for me.

“Since you’re in stable condition now, I’m gonna sleep in my room. You’re free to use the couch while you stay here.”

I bowed my head in thanks before my stomach let out one of the loudest growls I'd ever heard. "Umm... Is it possible for you to bring me anything to eat? I'm starving... and thirsty as well."

Suddenly snapping out of her sleepy state she exclaimed, "Damn, I completely forgot about that!" Walking over towards where I had woken up, she disappeared somewhere further back in the darkness, her voice still reaching me from wherever she was. "You've been out for three days. You really should have said something earlier, kid. I got some liquids in you, but between the surgery, the cleaning, and the other stuff, I haven't had the chance to feed you anything. Anyways, I had a feeling you were going to wake up soon since you were responding well to my treatment. Just give me a second."

It felt strange to know that so much time had passed without me realizing it. No wonder I felt so weak. A few minutes later, she came back with not only a jug of water, but bread, a bit of sliced meat, and cheese.

"Looks good, doesn't it? A lot better than the slop they usually feed you guys. Help yourself to whatever you want, but make sure not to overdo it. You're mildly starved, so if you eat too much you'll get pretty sick. Keep this in mind because if you vomit on any of my things, I'll kill you and find another Sora."

It worried me that I couldn't completely dismiss it as a joke. With that wonderful message, she bid me farewell and left down a small hallway I hadn't noticed before. After hearing a door creak open and close, I was left in silence. What a way to end the night. Now that she was gone, there wasn't much left to do but enjoy the meal she'd left behind. Despite the simplicity of it, the hunger I felt made it taste like the best thing I'd ever had. I kept in mind what she said and ate a reasonable amount despite wanting desperately to stuff my face. The rest I left on a nearby stand.

Although I felt better with a full belly, I was still left with so many questions. On top of it all, I was anxious about seeing Rosalia again. Even if she deserved it, was it wrong to trick her into such a dangerous plan? In the end, if it failed, we'd likely die.

I'd be no better than her for doing such a thing.

I'm too tired to deal with this. Pushing these stressful thoughts to the side for now, something came to my attention. I'd never asked that woman her name. Being an outsider, she likely had one. So many things were happening that it had slipped my mind, partly because I'm not used to such things.

As I thought about her, and the things she'd done to me, my cheeks became flushed and I felt embarrassed once more... Were all the things she did really necessary?

Chapter VIII

Reunion

It hadn't taken long after I'd laid down for me to drift off into a deep sleep. Despite still being in some pain, I hadn't slept this comfortably in ages. This *couch* felt like a cloud in comparison to the bed I normally slept on. Despite how cold the room was when I awoke, underneath the blanket everything was nice and warm. Looking at the fireplace, I noticed that the fire from last night must have died at some point as now the only sources of heat were my body and the sun's warmth that came in through the windows. Although I wanted to stay sleeping, I realized that if everyone was coming later in the day, I'd still be without half of my clothes. I needed to find that Medic again.

Wrapping myself in the blanket, I began the search for her, or at the very least my uniform. Although I spent the night peacefully, being like this makes me feel so exposed. I wonder if she did this on purpose for nefarious reasons... Actually, isn't this a normal thing for Medics to do? Letting wounds breathe is supposedly important.

As I wandered around the room, my mind seemed to take this opportunity to wander as well. It's strange to me that the only two people I've come to know so far haven't been the best when it comes to their personalities. The first one left me for dead and the second one seems to take pleasure in making me uncomfortable. Is it so hard to ask for a normal friend? Am I just the one that's strange here? If all the *normal* people are like this, it makes me dread meeting more of them.

Letting out a sigh, I looked out at the large tree swaying in front of Maia's house. It's a beautiful day today. After how frantic things have been, this quiet is rather nice. In my regular day-to-day life, my mornings are always frantic as you have to quickly get out of bed and line up outside or else the guards will come in and drag you out forcefully. On the seventh day they're a bit more lenient, but until now I've never been able to enjoy a peaceful morning like this.

It felt surreal to be so at ease considering the circumstances I was in. Perhaps I've come to terms with it all. Whatever happens, I'll either be free or I'll simply die as I was meant to before. Should the worst come to pass, it'll at least be a lot quicker this time around as I doubt they'd bother imprisoning me a second time.

With the gentle rays of the sun touching my face, I sighed once more, this time trying to forget about death and all the other cruelties of the world. Only a few nights ago, I truly believed the sun might never shine on me again. I should be grateful to be able to see another morning. So many things have happened in such a short amount of time, and now that I'm able to reflect on them, I feel some shame for what I'd said of the Gods.

Even if it was in my darkest moment, I can't excuse the vile thoughts that crept into my mind. In my heart, I was angry at them. I'd cast them aside and yet they still delivered me a savior in the end. Normally, I would pray for forgiveness, but I find that my faith has been scarred in some way. I still

can't make sense of this suffering, nor can I extinguish the anger that still remains within me. I may be safe now, but what of the future? What if this is simply a reprieve for suffering that is yet to come? Like saving a rat from drowning only to plunge it back in the water a moment later.

Until I can make sense of this all, I don't feel my prayers will be in true faith. It's better to focus on what's in front of me for now. With this in mind, I noticed that I was no longer on the verge of collapsing like I was the night before. I still felt weak, but the pain and fatigue was now manageable. It's astonishing what a bit of good food and rest can do for one's body.

On the stand where I'd put the food on the night before, I found what I'd been looking for. In place of the food was my uniform, neatly folded with my boots on the floor beside it. The Medic had woken up before me, which considering that it appeared to be noon, wasn't a surprise. With relief, I slid into my uniform and felt as the familiar fabric covered my face and body. Finally having my clothes back, I felt normal once more. To make it even better, it seems that the woman had mended my clothes and applied patches where the material was burned.

"Morning kid, I figured you'd want that back." Her voice seemingly came out of nowhere, making me jump, much to her amusement. She'd been so quiet that I hadn't noticed her. Coming out of the hallway, she continued. "I know they drill it into you, but you should really get used to not wearing that hood all the time. If it's that much of a problem, we'll deal with it later, but once we're outside these walls, I expect you to make more of an effort to show your face."

"That's reasonable..." I turned to look at her and in that moment, I felt the same burning in my chest as I looked into her eyes.

"You feeling better? Didn't think you'd be on your feet so fast. That's good."

"Ah, y-yes... It's a good thing. Thank you for all you've done for me, M'am."

I thought I'd be able to behave normally, but just the slightest remembrance of her teasing made it all unbearably awkward for me.

"Don't call me *M'am*, you'll make me feel like some old lady. My name is *Maia*. You should get used to introducing yourself and asking for people's names. We'll figure something out for you before leaving so you can blend into the outside world."

I didn't want to tell her I'd already received a name. Maybe if I remained quiet about it, I'd get a better one this time. This woman, Maia, seemed more sensible so it'd likely be something that wouldn't be so odd or cause me trouble.

Watching her move towards a nearby window, I noticed her looking out as if searching for something. The look on her face worried me a bit. She seemed nervous. Was she hiding something from me?

"They're taking longer than I expected. Maybe he's just having a hard time finding them... Idiots are wasting my time." It sounded more as if she were mumbling to herself than speaking to me.

Once she noticed my gaze, her voice rose as if giving me orders. "Hey kid, once they get here it's going to be your job to get them under control, got it?"

"*Under control?* What do you mean by that?"

"Actually... just forget it. I already told you last night what I need you to do. Screw it up and I'm putting you right back in that cell. Am I understood?"

I wasn't exactly sure what she meant, but I reflexively nodded upon hearing her tone. When she spoke like that, she sounded just like an Overseer. Although I didn't want to risk angering her, there was something urgent I needed to take care of.

"Umm..." Upon hearing me raise my voice she turned around, not seeming pleased that I was disturbing her once again. "I've been meaning to ask this... and I'm sorry for suddenly bringing it up, but is there a place where I can... relieve myself? I don't exactly know where that's done here."

She was clearly caught off-guard by my question. There was an awkward pause as she thought of an answer. Perhaps it wasn't a polite thing to say aloud, but it should have been obvious that this was something that needed to be done eventually.

"I'd tell you to use the outhouses that are close by, but there's an issue with that... You're technically an escaped prisoner."

"What?" I knew that this woman had pulled me out of prison, but I assumed it was through some official means. My shocked expression caused her to re-word her admission.

"Look, I know it seems bad, but this was the only way I could realistically do all of this. Officially, in an unofficial way, the two girls are going to be under my care if everything goes well. I'm going to be asking for forgiveness rather than permission, but I'm sure I can pull it off. Since that one girl is important they'll notice when she suddenly goes missing, the same wasn't really true for you. If I report that I've taken all three of you for study, at the same time, it'd draw suspicion and I'd likely be investigated. Anyways, you should just be thankful you're here to begin with, so don't stare at me like that!"

"I am grateful." I stated, in an effort to calm her down. "It's just confusing as to how you even got me out of there. I never assumed you'd done it without permission."

"It doesn't matter how you got here. All you need to know is that you're not allowed to leave this house unless I give you permission. Otherwise, you might as well leave your head behind while you're at it." Sensing my reaction she clarified. "I'm not making a threat. I'm telling you the truth. You won't be imprisoned again if they catch you. You'll be executed and if they figure out what I'm up to, they'll probably kill me too. If we don't want our lives ending in such a pointless way, then you'd better do as I say. You might still need to go out at some point despite all of this, so to help with that I got you a new number. Even so, it'll only get you so far so don't rely on it."

I looked down and saw that my armband was gone. Although it was just a piece of fabric with my number stitched onto it, that piece of cloth was the only trace of who I was. In its place was

nothing. I was no longer 719... I was nobody. It's not as if I can return to my old life, but something about this change made me unexpectedly sad. "Did you throw it away?" I asked in the hopes that she still had it lying around somewhere.

"Why do you care?" She responded with a shrug. "I cut it off your arm when I was examining you in the prison. It's not like I carried you here myself. I wanted to make sure the guards I had helping me wouldn't remember you. As far as they know, they were just helping with another random task. Like I said, they're obedient to a fault and on top of that they don't think too deeply about their actions."

"They carried me here? Wouldn't they find that strange?"

"It's a bit more complicated than that but you don't need to worry about it. Now hold still, I need to stitch your new identification on. Once I sort this out, you'll be able to fool people from a distance. Just keep in mind that this'll *only* work from a distance. I haven't been able to get my hands on a four digit number for you to use and I'm not skilled enough to make a convincing one myself."

I looked down at the armband to see the new number she had put on me. This would have happened sooner or later, but the suddenness of it all was perhaps what bothered me the most. Instead of the usual 719, I now saw it replaced with a foreign 624. I hate it. I feel like an imposter. As I focused on the armband, I suddenly came to a realization. This had to have belonged to someone.

"Where did you get this from?"

I felt a chill run down my spine with the way she looked back up at me. She could somehow tell where my eyes were, even beneath the hood. It was the first time I was genuinely frightened by her.

"Stop asking me so many damn questions. You're starting to wear on my nerves. Even if I answered everything, I doubt you'd be able to make sense of it all. An amnesiac like you is missing so much information that I'd be wasting my time teaching you every little thing you don't know. We both want our freedom, right? That's all we need to know about each other. I need you and you need me. We don't have to know every little detail to work together, so quit trying to pry into everything, alright?"

It seemed as though I'd finally reached the limits of her patience with me. Obediently, I stayed quiet as she finished. I guess she was right. We're only working together because we need to. I shouldn't think of her as anything more. It'll only be my fault if I hurt myself again.

The woman stood up and looked down at my arm, trying to make sure that it had been sewn correctly. She tugged on it before nodding in self-approval. Although I loathed to do it, there was still something she had left unanswered.

"Umm, Ma'm—I mean, Maia?"

"What?" Her reply was almost akin to a growl.

"You never told me where I could go to relieve myself."

“Oh.” The anger suddenly vanished from her face and she pointed behind her. “Go out the front door and head on into the back. You can use the trees for cover, but just don’t go too far.” I nodded and slowly made my way to the door. Just as I was about to put my hand on the doorknob she called out to me again. “I—nevermind, just be careful.”

Not knowing what she would have said, I could only ignore it as I made my way outside. Once I reached the back of her house, I saw that there was a small porch surrounded by a clearing. In this clearing was nothing but tall grass and a few wildflowers. Beyond that, were the woods that surrounded the house on all sides save for the front. This house of hers was fairly hidden, however, I did spy a path leading up to it when I first exited her home. I wonder how often people come this way. It’s only a small dirt path, but now that I know the reality of my situation, I fear running across anyone else.

After I’d gone into the woods and took care of my business, I began heading back when I suddenly heard loud footsteps coming up the dirt path. I was still near the back of the house so I simply hid myself and waited. These heavy steps sound like those of a Toma, but they seemed awkward and heavier than normal. Was he carrying something or injured?

Whatever his issue, he came right up to the front door of the house. Before he could even knock, Maia had already opened the door which clued me in that she was expecting him. I tried to peer in through one of the windows to see if I could spot what was happening, but from my point of view I could only see the table I’d awoken on, still covered in blood. As I moved to get a better look, Maia suddenly appeared and instantly noticed me. We stared at each other for a moment out of mutual surprise before she quickly grew angry and motioned for me to quickly come inside. I quickly hurried to the front of the house, only to find the Toma waiting for me by the open door.

“Hello. It is good to be meeting you.”

The Toma spoke with a strange accent the likes of which I’d never heard before. His way of speaking was the least of my concerns, however. What captured my attention instead was how he towered over me. Most Tomas are about a foot taller than a Sora on average, but this one was one of the rare exceptions. He had to be at least twice that. He was by far the largest Toma I’d ever seen and to make matters worse, he was a Champion.

Seeing such a giant man in armor nearly stopped my heart. The memory of that Toma slamming me onto the floor and breaking my bones suddenly played in my mind. Despite being physically well enough, I suddenly found it hard to take a breath. Sensing something was wrong, he moved away from the doorway and waved me inside. Pulling myself together, I squeezed past him and into the house, soon coming across another horrifying sight.

By the fireplace was a giant sack, the kind normally used for crops, and whatever was inside was thrashing around. I stared at Maia, who was undoing the knot that kept it closed quite casually. The moment it opened, two girls came tumbling out. One I immediately recognized, while the other I could only assume her identity.

Maia was in the process of dragging Rosalia into a more seated position when the girl began kicking wildly and trying to bite despite the gag in her mouth. The other girl, who had hair that was almost like gold, was similarly bound and gagged, however, she seemed too frightened to move. As Maia tried to get Rosalia under control, she lost her grip on her which allowed Rosalia to kick her captor in the shin. As the heel of her boot slammed against Maia's leg, the woman let out a short, pained grunt before raising her hand as if to strike Rosalia. I looked away for a moment thinking she'd strike her, but when I turned back she was instead face to face with the young girl. Gripping her by the collar, Maia made sure she couldn't move away.

"You better watch yourself. I'm trying to untie you, so sit still or I swear I'll leave you with welts. If you don't think I'm serious, just try that shit again!" With tears of anger, or perhaps from fright, Rosalia looked away and closed her eyes. Maia seemed to take this as a sign of submission and let go of her. "Good. Keep doing what I tell you and I promise you won't get hurt."

As I looked on, Rosalia suddenly turned her attention to me, the look on her face changing. Confused, I turned around to see if anything was nearby. The Toma wasn't next to me and nothing else of note was close by. Am I imagining it or does it seem as though she somehow recognizes me?

Don't be happy about it, you idiot.

She left you to die.

Whatever my feelings towards her, this was interesting purely in the sense that something must be differentiating me. I've lost my previous identification number and my uniform has no distinct marks. What is she seeing that I'm not?

She stopped any form of struggle and continued staring as if in disbelief. My instincts told me that she recognized me, and yet there was no logical explanation. As I stepped closer, her face slowly began to show a growing fear. It was as though she were looking at a spirit coming to haunt her. For a moment, anger took over as I remembered that same look on her face when I was begging her for help. My heart began to race and I felt a spike in adrenaline.

She has no idea what she's put me through

As I stepped closer, I realized that I'd unconsciously tightened my hand into a fist. After what she'd done to me, this would be nothing. She deserves it.

Do it.

It's nothing compared to the pain I felt.

I tried to raise my arm to strike her, but my hand suddenly began to shake. I was so angry and yet I couldn't bring myself to do it. It's not that I had come to my senses and realized this would heavily impede the task Maia had given me. It was the way she looked at me. Her bright blue eyes stared straight into my soul. As a tear fell down her cheek I suddenly felt a pang of sadness.

Ignore it.

She's faking it.

Even in my enraged state, my animosity towards her lessened at this pitiful sight. She was tied up, scared, and already had tears flowing down her cheeks as she barely maintained her composure. I couldn't bring myself to hurt her. After sighing and letting this evil feeling fade away, I finally broke the silence.

"I never wanted to see you again... I don't understand why the Gods brought us together once more." It seemed my words were enough for her suspicions to be confirmed as tears began to freely flow down her cheeks. She was bawling and desperately trying to speak, but the rag in her mouth made it pointless. "You must have thought you'd never see me again, didn't you?" Her ears drooped down and a look of shame came upon her. "After all I did, you still abandoned me in the end... Your supposed *friendship* was the worst thing that's happened in my life."

I exaggerated my limp and went over towards the couch, slowly lowering myself and leaning back to rest, I chose to ignore Rosalia and turned my attention to the new girl. She seemed to be staring at me as well. Since neither of the girls had their hoods on, I could see their faces clearly. Although Maia was beautiful, this one was even more so, to the point of seeming unreal.

As if the Gods had made her out of the finest porcelain, her skin was flawless yet painted with a bit of red, perhaps due to the exertion she experienced during her journey here. Her hair was colored like the golden letters of the Chaplain's garments and was long enough to reach her waist. Timid and innocent as she appeared, she had a different appeal when compared to Maia. Staring at her green-ish blue eyes, I was utterly captivated as they examined me in turn. Even without speaking to her, I felt an immediate affection for her I'd never felt for the others.

I was brought out of my trance by Rosalia finally breaking free of her restraints and rushing over towards this other girl. Immediately, she began gnawing at the girl's restraints before Maia came and slapped the Shinrin on the back of her head.

"Hey, stop that! Do you even understand how valuable good rope is? Go over there and wait!"

Rosalia snarled at her for a moment, baring her teeth like an actual wild animal. I expected this to finally be the moment Maia's patience ran out, but to my surprise Maia was eerily calm. Instead of yelling, she met Rosalia's rowdy intimidation with a calm face which was confusing until I looked closer and saw the violent intent that shone in her eyes. Rosalia immediately picked up on this and backed away. Despite not wanting to, she allowed Maia to get close to this other girl, her *sister*.

Strangely, as if seeking comfort, Rosalia proceeded to come over and sit down on the floor by my feet. Even after I had made my dislike of her apparent... Why would she do this? Had I not been clear enough? Turning to look up at me, Rosalia hesitantly spoke up.

"Umm... Captain?"

I ignored her initially, but she timidly tugged on the hem of my pant's leg which made it hard to continue my act. Turning back towards her, I gave a cold, "What do you want?" in response.

“What’s happening? What do they want with us?” Her pleading for an answer annoyed me as I had no interest in giving a proper response.

“Why should I spare you the same feeling I went through when you left me for dead? Give me a single reason.” Rosalia proceeded to grab my leg and held it tightly, almost as if trying to squeeze out comfort from me. “Stop doing that!” I commanded while yanking it away from her. The look she gave me in turn brought a sudden pang of guilt. Trying to make this feeling go away, I relented and assured her of her basic safety. “These people aren’t looking to harm you or your sister. Just sit down and stop trying to cause trouble for once.”

“You promise they won’t hurt us?”

“What does it matter if I promise you anything? I don’t trust a word from you and we’re worse off than *strangers* now.”

As the words flowed from my mouth it felt as though the bitterness of my soul escaped through my lips. I wanted her to absorb these words as though they were poison. I could never bring myself to strike her, but I needed some outlet for these terrible feelings before they began to consume me.

Where was her apology?

All of her questions were centered around her situation... She hasn’t spared a thought for me.

Rosalia once again held onto my leg, openly crying this time. At first it annoyed me, and I planned to yank it away again, but as she continued, I found it hard to do so.

I’m such a fool to let myself be toyed with like this

She’s not remorseful, just scared.

Hearing her quiet sobs and sniffing didn’t evoke the response within me that I thought it would. I wanted a sense of satisfaction from having her feel a fraction of the suffering I’d gone through. I thought I’d feel better, but I just feel as though I’m doing something wrong. It wasn’t even a bittersweet feeling, it was all just bitter.

Once Maia had finished untying the other girl, Rosalia rushed over and the two embraced. The golden-haired girl seemed to be older, perhaps around my age. She held Rosalia in a very protective manner, tucking the young girl’s head into her chest and rubbing her back in a soothing manner. Now that Maia was done, she walked over towards me and leaned toward my ear.

“You’re a lot harsher than I thought you’d be, kid. Don’t forget to bring them to our side.”

Before she could walk away, the Toma suddenly stepped forward, removing his glove to show a deep bite wound on his hand. I could easily guess as to what happened, but the amount of blood that leaked out from his glove made me wary of treating Rosalia any worse than I already had.

“Before I go, can this be fixed?” He asked as he offered his hand to Maia.

“First I need to clean it properly, then I’ll stitch you up.” She replied, pushing his hand away. “I still need to save my energy for later.”

As Maia returned from getting her medical supplies, the golden-haired girl suddenly spoke up saying, “Whatever you want, just take me and leave Rose out of it.”

She seemed to have an accent as well, although it wasn’t as thick as the Toma’s. It was more gentle and flowing, and rather pleasant to hear. That being said, it pained me to see how selfless she was being. She cared so much for Rosalia that she was willing to offer herself up to us. Would Rosalia be willing to abandon her to save her own skin? Technically, we didn’t need Rosalia. I’m sure things would be easier without her, but I wasn’t sure how I felt about coercing this girl into participating in our plan. Being innocent, I didn’t want to make her needlessly suffer.

Sounding a bit impressed, Maia spoke gently to the girl. “Well aren’t you brave! Here I thought you were the cowardly type based on what I saw. The sentiment is sweet, but we’d prefer to keep the *both* of you together. In fact, it wouldn’t be fair if your little friend got to go free after all the trouble she caused, right?”

“And what are you going to do to her?” The once timid expression on the girl’s face disappeared as she stared Maia down.

“Right now? Nothing at all.” Suddenly turning to me, a slight smile came onto Maia’s face. “Actually, I just thought of the perfect task for your little sister. Considering she’s the one responsible for this boy’s injuries, it’s only right that she look after him while we go handle some important tasks, right?”

“What do you mean by *important tasks*?”

“All of us here, for one reason or another, want to escape this place. In order to do this, your help is crucial. You might not understand it, but you don’t necessarily have a choice either. As a peace offering, we’re willing to take your little friend along with us even if she’s not useful. That’s definitely better than leaving her behind, right?”

“I don’t want her involved. You’re trying to escape and it sounds like a good way to get us all killed.”

“Maybe.” Maia turned her attention to the Toma’s hand. The conversation almost becoming like a secondary objective to her. Her eyes never left her work as she continued speaking. “It’s an obvious possibility that we can fail, but you know what’s a *certainty*? That other girl won’t survive here.”

“How can you know that?” The girl’s eyes narrowed as though she were trying to physically see through Maia’s words.

“She’s been put into an offensive role. Not even a day into that role and she was almost killed. You two might lack the decency to apologize for everything you put this boy through, but I promise you that this will be the first and last time you’re ever in a situation like this. The next time there’ll be nobody to save your friend. As a Supporter, you might’ve been able to eke out some miserable existence here, but I doubt the little one will still be around come spring.”

The girl looked away as if deep in thought. In the silence, I noticed Rosalia wiping away her tears and turning her attention back towards me.

“Captain... I know it’s too late now, but I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to run away like that, it’s just that... I-I was scared and before I knew it, I was running out the door. I shouldn’t have left you like that.”

She’s only doing this because of Maia’s words.

“But you did.” I responded, not angrily but simply pointing out the truth.

“I know...” She suddenly moved closer towards me and pleaded with her head nearly touching the floor. “Please! If you give me another chance, I promise I’ll make it up to you!”

Both I and her sister were stunned by this display of groveling. Having everyone stare at me while waiting for my response was unbearably awkward. It made it hard to even formulate a reply to this bizarre situation.

“Why are you... Just give me some time to think. Even if I could forgive you, I can’t just say everything is fine and move on. I’d be shaming myself by forgiving you so easily... And it’s especially not something I want to be pressured into doing.”

Suddenly butting into our conversation, Maia suggested, “Well, if you need time to talk, then now’s the perfect time because I need to hurry up and get out of here. I’m already late as it is.” Putting the final stitch into the Toma’s hand, she sliced the thread with a small knife. “As rotten as the situation between you two is, when you think about it, lots of people have probably tried to kill you by now, right? Of those people, how many of them ever gave you a sincere apology?”

“That logic doesn’t really—”

“Anyways, give it some thought while we’re gone.” Quickly leaning closer to me, she whispered, “Remember the job I gave you and don’t screw it up because of your own personal feelings. Your neck is on the line here, think about that for motivation.” Turning to Rosalia, her voice was suddenly much gentler. “While I’m gone, I need you to watch over him. Get him whatever he needs and make sure he gets some rest too. Can you do that for me, sweetie?”

“I can do that.” The young Shinrin replied, just as confused as I was by the shift in Maia’s behavior. “Where are you taking my sister?”

“She’s going to help me with my work. Tomorrow, you’re coming with me instead, so don’t worry about missing out on anything.” Maia replied, still speaking in her strangely chipper tone. “We’ll be back by sunset, so until then, take good care of your *friend*.”

“I’m not leaving her alone with him.” Rosalia’s sister suddenly interjected. “Either we go together or stay here together.”

There was a slight twitch in Maia’s eyebrow as she desperately tried to mask her anger with a fake chuckle. “You’re just being overprotective! This boy wouldn’t harm a fly, and considering his

condition, she's more of a danger to him than the other way around. We won't take long anyways, I promise."

The girl didn't seem to like it, but was stuck in a position where she couldn't decline. With the help of Rosalia agreeing to take care of me, the older sister finally relented. Very quickly, Maia looked back at me with a smirk on her face, giving me a slight nod. This was the closest I'd gotten to approval from her since I got here. In some ways, her sweet voice and kind persona is almost more frightening than when she yells.

Before they left, Rosalia ran over to her sister and gave her one last hug. As they stood next to each other, I realized something. Rosalia's sister is actually rather tall. She might actually be a bit taller than me, and wasn't far behind Maia's height, who outside of the Toma, was the tallest of us due to her age. As far as I knew, Sora females were supposed to be smaller than the men. Were the Sora of the East larger? Our size is to accommodate our flight, so it seemed odd that this would be the case with them.

As the sisters said their goodbyes, I began to wonder what exactly Maia expected of me. Do I really have to forgive her? I suppose as long as I hide my dislike of her it might be enough. Seeing the rest of our group leave, I felt rather anxious knowing what would come next. It's quite a lot of pressure to be put under on such short notice. I can't say I'm looking forward to this afternoon in any way...

The Cogs of Gods: Chapter IX

Speaking from the Heart

Staring out a nearby window, I was still debating as to how I should accomplish my task. I had assumed she would grow bored and move away eventually, however, when I turned back around she was still standing in front of me. She seemed to want to say something, but I wasn't in the mood for more talking right now. If anything, I wanted to sleep so that perhaps I'd be in a better mood. As much as I didn't want to speak to her, having her stare at me was even less desirable.

Looking straight at her, I noticed that she was timidly holding her hands close to her chest. Her ears were still drooped and she seemed hesitant to speak. Finally having had enough of this, I decided to be the first to break the silence.

"What is it?"

"Umm... Do you need anything?"

"No."

I thought that would be the end of it, however, she continued to stand there. Waiting for me to say more. Trying to ignore her, I turned away once again, however, this time she spoke up.

"Are you feeling okay?"

"I'm fine... Well, not exactly, but there's not much you can do about it."

"Does it hurt?"

"It does."

"I'm sorry..."

I sighed and closed my eyes for a moment, trying to figure out how to get out of this situation. I'm not going to be able to deal with this all afternoon. Is there any way to get rid of her? A task I can give that would make her busy until the rest of them return?

When I opened my eyes she was right in front of my face. I jerked my head back in surprise and in response she backed away while apologizing.

"What were you doing?" I asked, completely puzzled by her actions.

"You weren't making any noise, even your breathing was quiet. I got scared... sorry."

Growing annoyed, I finally snapped at her. "Apologizing to me over and over isn't going to change anything. You've already apologized for what you did. There's no more that you can do. Just leave me in peace."

Not saying another word, she bowed her head in defeat and sat on the floor. Seeing the pitiful girl like that triggered some sympathy within me. As much as I don't like her, I feel as though I'm slowly crossing the line into needless cruelty.

"Why are you sitting on the ground?"

She hesitated as she asked, "Do you not want me here?"

I could have answered *yes* as a part of me wanted to, however, I chose to be patient with her instead saying, “You can sit over here if you’re so adamant about watching over me. If the rest of our group comes back and finds you like this, they’ll think badly of me. Just stay on your side and don’t come near me.”

Her ears perked up as she quickly got up and sat down on the opposite end of the couch. Despite how cold I was being toward her, she surprisingly seemed rather content at being allowed to sit by me. It was a rather odd mood shift, but I didn’t pay it much mind. Looking back out the window, some time passed as we sat in silence.

She seemed to dislike the quiet and would fidget which was quite annoying to me. I tried to ignore it, but eventually I grew curious as to what exactly she was doing. When I turned around, I could hardly believe what I was looking at. One of the questions that had been at the back of my mind for a while now had unexpectedly been answered.

“Rosalia, this is... Is it truly real? Can you control it?”

She froze up for a moment and quickly grabbed it, tucking it behind her back. “Geez, you make it seem like it’s something weird. I was just brushing it with my hands to keep it nice and clean... I guess it’s something you’ve never seen though, right? Since you were curious, yeah, it’s like any other part of my body, but most of the time it sorta does its own thing. Kinda like how you don’t think about blinking but your eyelids still move. Oh, check out the new uniform they gave me!” Turning around, I saw the modification they’d made to her pants. There was a neatly cut slit for her tail to poke through. It was actually tailored surprisingly well for something likely done for only a handful of people. Overall, her uniform also fit far better than before. Although it was still a bit loose, I wouldn’t describe it as oversized. She just happens to be rather petite in addition to her short height.

“I see...” I wasn’t sure what else to say as I was still trying to get used to seeing a human being with these animalistic body parts. Looking at her tail poking out from behind her, however, I suddenly thought of something. “Shouldn’t I have seen your tail when you were first brought here?”

“Geez, don’t remind me. The big guy ended up tying it to the back of my leg after he captured us. Even though it’s uncomfortable, I’ve been tucking it in my pants whenever I go out since people kept staring at me. Things have been scary ever since... Well, you know... I really thought something bad was going to happen to us today until I saw you.”

“Just because I’m here doesn’t change anything. Neither of us would be in this mess if you hadn’t gotten us into that situation in the first place. Now we’re stuck here for better or worse.”

Rosalia began to fidget. She seemed to be building up the courage to say something. “Umm, Captain... You mind if I ask you something?”

“Depends what it is.”

“How’d you even end up involved with those guys?”

“It’s a long story.”

“I have time! Uh... but, that’s *if* you wanna tell me.”

I wasn’t sure if I wanted to recount everything that happened, but there was nothing else to do and it would help if she wasn’t completely clueless as to how we ended up in this strange arrangement. Not to mention, I should rub the troubles she put me through into her face. A part of me feels like she still isn’t taking things seriously enough.

As I began recounting everything that happened after she’d abandoned me, she seemed more still than I’d ever seen her. There were no questions or comments, just patient listening. In a way, saying everything out loud helped me process all the insane things that have happened to me recently. It’s become hard to even imagine that I somehow survived it all. In a way, I could almost believe it was a bad dream if I didn’t have the injuries to prove it to be true.

I’d glossed over my dark thoughts in prison and I left out the strange behavior of Maia, but other than that she got a fairly accurate retelling of what I experienced to the best of my memory. When I was done, she had turned away from me. Confused, I leaned in closer to see what she was looking at. I spotted nothing out the window and it wasn’t until I suddenly heard her sniffing that I realized what was happening. I suppose I was successful in making her feel bad yet again, but at this point I realized that I was failing the task Maia had given me.

“I’m sorry...” She said once more, almost as if it were all she could think to say. She still tried to hide her face from me as if ashamed.

“I umm...” I struggled for a moment to think of what to say. I shouldn’t keep bearing down on her with guilt. If she’s a crying mess when they come back, I’m sure her sister won’t be very happy. Trying to approach the situation a bit more neutrally, I tried reasoning with her. “Apologizing again doesn’t really change anything. After thinking a while, I can understand why you left. It doesn’t mean I deem it right, but... Well, the point is that there’s not much we can do about it at this point. We’re stuck in this situation and it’d be best if we can work together despite how I may feel about you.”

She remained silent, wiping her eyes as she regained her composure. “Do you hate me?” The question came suddenly and in such a meek way.

“I... *don’t*?” The word came out of me almost involuntarily to the point where even I was caught off-guard by it. Thinking about it, I wouldn’t feel such pity towards her if I truly hated her. I disliked her weakness and selfishness, but I didn’t hate Rosalia.

“That didn’t sound really convincing, Captain...” She looked back at me, seeming unsure of what more to say.

“I’m still angry and bitter over what you did to me, but when I think about it, I wouldn’t even be talking to you right now if I truly hated you. In the Book of Life, it spoke of hatred, of wars, of murder and other things of that sort. I dislike you after what you did to me... but I don’t hate you.”

“That’s... sorta good I think. Do you promise you don’t hate me?”

I let out a sigh upon hearing this. Although I didn't see the point, especially now, I relented.. "I do. I promise."

Turning part way around, she looked at me over her shoulder. Her somber expression didn't really show that my words had made her much happier.

"You think... We could still be friends?"

When I thought about it, she was being very unfair to me right now. I've been very generous to her and yet she still demands more, even using her tears to try and sway me. Somehow denying her felt like a morally bad thing to do. How did she manage to do this to me? I expect this level of cunning from Maia, not this young girl... Then again, it may just be her genuine feelings. Coming to terms with what I was going to say, I let out another sigh.

"Not like before... *However*" As I said that last word, her ears perked up in anticipation. "I'm willing to set aside our issues because we won't be able to survive otherwise. Maybe in time, if you truly regret your actions and swear to never betray me like that again... Perhaps then I can truly forgive you."

Although she seemed happier, a bit of hesitation still remained in looking at me once more. "Earlier, you were right to say those things to me... I really did think I'd never see you again. I was scared that I was responsible for you dying. When I saw you again, I didn't believe it at first, but when I realized it really was you, I was scared you'd be a lot angrier with me. I thought we'd never talk again. I was scared you'd even try to take revenge for everything that happened... I guess you can say I'm scared of a lot of things." She took a quick glance at me before looking down again. "When it comes to my sister, I always try to act brave so that she won't be so scared. She's probably even worse than me when it comes to being a coward... But I guess I didn't take care of you the same way. I thought because you were stronger that you didn't need me... Or maybe that's what I told myself so that I wouldn't feel so bad about running away. I messed up. I'm a stupid coward... I wanna promise you I'll never do it again, but I'm scared I'll mess up when the time comes."

Realizing that she was finally taking things seriously, I eased up on her. "I understand." Reaching my hand out towards her, I wiped her face since it was still wet with tears. "You might not believe it, but I'm often scared as well." She seemed surprised at this and turned her gaze up toward me. "The difference between you and I is that I have nobody to rely on. It doesn't matter if I'm scared. I don't have the privilege of running away while someone protects me. I have to face things I'm terrified of constantly. It's the only way I've managed to survive"

"What about the Toma? You didn't have to help me. You could have ran."

"I suppose I could have... but I knew he'd probably kill you after what you did to him."

"But that doesn't explain why you saved me. If you were scared you could have ran. Nobody else would have cared."

“That’s true...” Running out of excuses, I finally relented and shared the real reason. “Until I’d met you, no other person in the Academy had spoken to me in the same way you had. Everyone is cold and distant or hateful at worst. In comparison, you were kind... if a bit strange.”

“H-Hey, I’m not weird! Am I?” I stifled a chuckle as best I could, however, the brief motion that did occur caused me great pain which was easily discernible to Rosalia. “Are you okay?” She asked as she came closer, but I held up my hand to stop her.

“You are a bit weird.” I reaffirmed, which seemed to annoy her. “But I do like that aspect of you. It’s good that you’re different from the others.”

“Geez...” Rosalia fidgeted with her tail as she looked away from me. “You’re one to talk.”

“You’re right. Even so, going back to what I was saying before, you seem to always have someone looking out for you. It must have been a shock to suddenly have that role reversed.”

“I don’t know... I think you’re just overthinking it.”

“I could be, but whether I’m right or wrong, it’s just how I understand it.”

She shook her head. “Now you’re being too nice. I ran away because I was scared... and if you trust me again, I might just end up doing the same.”

“That’s true.” I scratched my chin, which was difficult through the hood, but I eventually came upon a new answer. “It’s not as if I expect you to rescue me from a Toma or some other threat far beyond your capabilities.”

“Then what are you trying to say?”

“I just wanted you to try. Even if all you had done was offer your hand. Just one attempt to pull me up. All I wanted to know was that you were willing to go back to help me. I wouldn’t have asked you to give your life, I just wanted to know you would have offered it in the same way I had. You’re no warrior though, so maybe it’s wrong to put such a burden on you... I suppose in the end, I just wanted to know that you cared. That you weren’t just simply using me for your own means. After you left, I had to assume it was the latter.”

“Take off your glove.” Her sudden strange demand caused me to ask for clarification of what she’d just said. Instead, she sternly commanded, “Just do it.”

With some hesitation, I took off my glove and before I could react she grabbed my hand and interlocked her fingers with mine. The sudden feeling of her skin against mine froze my arm in its place. My heart began to pound as I wondered what she was doing.

“R-Rosalia what are you—”

She closed her eyes and then in a sing-song-like voice she began chanting a strange spell.

I Rosalia, swear to you, Captain, a vow of friendship

‘Till now, ‘till death, ‘till even after

In light or dark

I’ll never be far

*So our days will be filled with laughter
I cross my heart and swear it true
The words I say in front of you
For if I lie then may I die
And a thousand needles pierce my eye*

Upon finishing she gave a shy smile and let go of my hand. Still surprised by what had just happened, I hesitantly asked, "Was that some sort of spell?"

Rosalia giggled in response. "You've never heard this before? Senga said it's a special promise for when you want to be friends forever. It's something that people were supposed to do in the past. You can't take it back either! If you do, you'll get cursed!"

"So then it's a curse?"

"Maybe? But if it is then it's fine because I only cursed myself. You only suffer if you break the promise anyways, so that's how you know I'm *serious* about this!" After seeing my lack of response she quickly eased my concerns. "Geez, you're being silly! These kinds of things aren't real, Captain! It's just something that's for fun... but, the promise I made to you was real. Even if I'm scared, I'll at least try for your sake. You'd do—You did, the same for me."

Despite how puffy and red her eyes were from crying, they looked much more cheerful now. Even in this state, there was something calming about looking at them. Maybe it was the color? They did remind me of the sky after all.

"Hm?" Rosalia began to wonder what I was doing.

"Ah... I was just—"

My stomach suddenly growled, bailing me out of an awkward situation for the first time. I was almost starting to become like her with how often I was seeking food recently.

"You haven't eaten yet?" She asked before replacing it with another question. "That girl said that she left some food. Where's her kitchen?"

"It's over that way." I answered while pointing.

"Then I'll go get it while you wait. It's my job to take care of you for today, right?"

She quickly went off in the direction of the kitchen. A while passed and it was strangely quiet, so I slowly got up on my feet to go investigate. As soon as I turned around, I saw Rosalia simply standing there, staring at the bloody table. Making my way closer, I saw that she was covering her mouth and nose.

"Are you alright?"

"Am I alright? Are *you* alright?!" She asked before turning her head away from the scene. "I smelled it earlier, but it absolutely reeks of blood here! Is this all yours? What did they do to you?!"

“I’m not exactly sure, but you shouldn’t worry yourself. I feel much better than before. Is your nose sensitive to smells?” She nodded her head quickly in response. “Then head back to the couch. I’m well enough to be able to get our food for us.”

Although she seemed to feel guilty for not helping, the smell appeared strong enough to convince her to agree. It took a few trips back and forth to be able to carry all of the food, but eventually we had everything we needed to begin eating.

“I’m sorry you had to do all that.” Rosalia said as she hesitantly took a piece of the dried meat from the wooden board I’d placed between us.

“You should have told me your sense of smell was so sharp. There’s a lot of things I don’t know about you. Are all your senses so heightened?”

“I dunno, it’s not like I can tell what it’s like for you guys. As far as I know, my smell and hearing are the only things that are really different... Oh, and I can see in the dark too.”

“That makes sense.” Although her ears and eyes had some special qualities to them, her nose seemed no different from mine. I suppose the inner workings had to be different somehow. Reaching for some of the food, I stopped upon noticing her tail moving. “What’s the tail for then?”

“Balance?” She replied, shrugging her shoulders. “I can move better than *Sunny* can, but then again she’s kinda clumsy anyways.”

“Sunny?”

“My sister, her name’s *Senga* but I call her *Sunny* to tease her since she’s pretty serious a lot of the time.”

“I see...” Despite knowing better, I couldn’t help asking out of sheer curiosity. “Can you run on all fours?”

Her nose wrinkled for a moment as she looked up at me. Coupled with the look in her eyes, I realized this was the first time I’d seen her angry.

“I’m not a dog!”

“Sorry sorry, I’m just asking out of curiosity. I really didn’t mean anything by it.”

“Yeah, whatever.” She seemed to let the comment slip as she began eating. “It sucks being able to smell like I can. Your blood, even from here, it’s still kind of strong. The second I got in here, I could smell it. It’s part of the reason I was scared you guys were gonna do something bad to us.”

“We can go ahead and clean it after we’re done. I’m sure it’ll put Maia in a better mood as well.”

Rosalia didn’t respond to this, instead she looked at me rather inquisitively. “Hey, since you were asking me questions, I’ve got one about you. How come I can’t see your wings? Do they get really small or do you hide them underneath your clothes somehow?”

“Not exactly... It’s actually rather complicated. If you’re willing to listen, I can explain to you what we were taught.” She nodded her head enthusiastically, giving me her undivided attention. At

least as much as she could muster while still stuffing her face. “Well, the differences between our races stem from the Gods and their gifts bestowed upon us. For Tomas they manifest physically in their large size and strength. For you, I suppose it’s similar in some way. For us Sora, however, it’s more like a gift we actively borrow. Our wings aren’t exactly physical things. It’s... well, I’m not sure how to explain it but I’ll let you see for yourself if I can manage it.”

Despite my poor condition, I felt the sensation of my wings manifesting. The feeling was somewhat similar to stretching a muscle. It was a pleasant sensation and being able to do this meant I was recovering well.

“Woah!” Rosalia exclaimed as her eyes widened. “I didn’t realize it worked like that! I thought this whole time that they were just a part of you... Can I touch them?”

Seeing the excitement in her eyes, I couldn’t deny her request. “You’re welcome to do so.” She slowly reached her hand out, stroking a single feather of my wing with her finger. “They’re not fragile, nor are they really a part of my body. If you want, you can even pluck a feather out.”

“Are you sure?”

“Go ahead and try.”

She did as I suggested, grabbing the feather in between her fingers and pulling. As it came loose I felt the slightest sensation.

“This doesn’t hurt you?” Her concern quickly gave way to her astonishment as the feather began to ever so gently glow before suddenly breaking apart into small pieces and floating away into nothing like the burning ashes of a fire. “Where did it go?”

“Back to the Gods.” I answered, almost as if I were the Chaplain himself. “To tell you the truth, I can’t answer more than that. These wings aren’t ours to keep. It has its positives and negatives like any other gift. They can be damaged or destroyed without harming us. After a day, they’ll come back to their full form. That being said, if we’re in too much pain, too injured, or unconscious, the wings disappear. It requires some level of concentration I suppose. Not much, but I’ve seen the consequences of having them disappear mid-flight... It’s not something you want to see.”

“That’s so weird.” She seemed to be speaking her thoughts aloud. Realizing what she said, she covered her mouth and tried to backtrack the comment. “I-I meant that it’s weird in an *interesting* way! Not in a bad way!”

“It’s fine for you to think it’s strange. For me, a Shinrin is a strange sight as well.”

“I look weird to you?” She seemed to dislike my comment. Immediately, I regretted saying such a thing aloud. Trying to avoid insulting her, I wracked my mind for any way to rephrase it.

“I meant that it’s very *new* to me... It’s very different from what I’m used to, but I suppose you’re a fairly different person in general to what I’m used to... What I mean is that it’s a positive thing.” She didn’t seem convinced by my words. Trying to distract her, I let my wings dissipate. Immediately, Rosalia’s attention was grabbed by the sight before her. She stared in awe as a once

physical thing suddenly vanished in front of her eyes. As I watched her, a thought came to mind. “Well, since I showed you my wings, would you do me a favor?”

“Depends.” She replied, sounding a bit suspicious.

“Would you allow me to touch your ears?” She seemed surprised by the request which immediately made me begin trying to justify my request. “I just assumed it’d be a reasonable request considering you—”

“No way!” She vehemently denied me while shaking her head. Perhaps realizing that she’d disappointed me, she soon relented. “I-I know you’re just curious but... I’ll think about it after we’re done eating.”

Her gifts are physical, unlike mine.

I basically just asked to touch her body.

Why am I so stupid?

My leg tensed up as I tried desperately to hide my embarrassment. I need to keep watch of the stupid comments I’m making. Trying to take her mind off things, she seemed to be eating even faster than before. It was actually something that was quite astounding given her size. The amount and speed at which she ate almost seemed impossible for her size.

“Rosalia, were you hungry as well?”

“Sorta.” She simply replied while continuing to devour her share. It was hard for me to keep up with her because I had to hold my face covering with one hand while grabbing the food with the other. Eventually, she noticed my struggle and asked, “How come you’re still wearing that hood? It’s not like I’m gonna report you... and you’re kinda already in trouble anyways.”

“It’s hard to break habits. I’ll have to eventually remove it once we’re free of this place, but for now I want at least a shred of normalcy.”

“I think it’ll be nice once you get used to it. I like you better without your face being all covered.”

“Is that so?” Seeing that she was nearing the end of her feast, she began eyeing my portion. Although she didn’t steal it, it was easy to tell from the look on her face that her hunger hadn’t been satisfied yet. “If you’d like, you can have some of my share.”

“Are you sure?” She seemed to ask mostly as a formality as I could see her already deciding on what piece to take.

“Go ahead.” Quickly aiming for the link of dried sausage, she seemingly ignored the bread and cheese. Perhaps now that she was in a good mood, I could ask a question that was a bit more obtuse. “Are Shinrins known for eating large amounts, like Tomas?”

“Huh? I’m just eating what you offered!”

“I didn’t mean it as an insult. It’s just something we have to know for the road ahead. We’ll need extra rations if that’s the case.”

Seeing my reasoning, she dropped her guard. “I’m not sure if it’s because of what I am. I never got extra portions or anything like the Tomas, so maybe it’s just me.”

“Is it a disease?”

“No no! I’m totally healthy! I just sorta eat a lot for some reason. It’s more annoying than anything, but you don’t have to worry about me. I just eat when I can, and if I’m hungry I can deal with it.”

I made a mental note to warn Maia about this. That Toma was sure to eat a large share of our rations, it’d be wise to pack extra for Rosalia if possible. Worst case scenario, I can continue sharing some of my portion with her since I don’t need as much food as the others. Now that we were nearing the end of the meal, a thought suddenly popped into my mind.

Didn’t she say she’d let me touch her ears when we were done eating?

“About what we discussed earlier...”

Rosalia looked up for a moment puzzled before the realization hit her. Covering her ears she yelled back at me, “You’re seriously still thinking about that?!”

Quickly trying to recover, I downplayed the comment. “Well, I’m a curious person. You said it would be fine once we were done eating and I let you touch my wings. It seemed only fair since you promised—”

“I never promised *that!*” She pointed a finger at me accusingly. “You’ve just been nice to me so you can guilt me into it!”

I felt my body tighten the moment she put it all together, in an attempt to shift blame, I invoked the teachings of the Chaplain once more. “I’ve been kind simply because the Gods watch my actions. It is only just to act in such a way towards you... and for you to keep your promises.” I had to turn my head away as I finished to avoid seeing her reaction. A feeling of mischievous joy built inside of me and I could feel my face turning into a smile. It felt almost like a fit of coughing, but I realized I was on the verge of laughing.

So this is what it’s like.

“I swear, you’re such a weirdo sometimes... How come you’ve bought into the *Gods* stuff so much anyways? What even makes you think it’s real?”

“Because I simply do.” The question helped me calm down and refocused my attention. Despite her disbelief, I answered with pure honesty. “I understand why someone like you might not believe, and I’ve had my doubts, but I’ve always had this sense that something has been watching over me.”

“You get treated pretty badly for someone who’s being watched by a god.”

“There’s probably a good reason I’m not aware of yet. I’m not always faithful, for instance. Sometimes I get mad at the Gods. Sometimes I wonder if they’re really there. I suppose I still struggle with the unfairness of my situation quite often... but, it’s also a *miracle* I’m still alive, right? Isn’t it also

quite *miraculous* that you and I were able to meet again? Rather, it's *miraculous* we even met in the first place."

"You really think that's a miracle? I think that lady's just been stalking us. It's the same one from the ceremony. You know that, right?"

"I do, but even so I still consider it a blessing. If I only focused on the bad in my life, I'd likely have drowned in my own sorrow by now. That's why, right now, in this moment where I can share a meal with you and be at peace, I'm filled with gratitude. Whoever, or whatever, is truly watching over me, is who I'm thanking. The Gods are the best explanation I've come across for who should receive such praise. As far as I'm concerned, they're just as real as anything else in this room."

"Huh..." Rosalia seemed to genuinely take in my words. "I've never really thought about it like that. To me, it always sounded like some crazy stuff. I mean, we can't see or interact with them... But, I guess I can see why you believe in it. Your life's been a lot different from mine after all."

"Exactly, and that's why..." I couldn't help but notice her tail swinging from side-to-side which distracted me and ruined whatever I was about to say.

Seeing that I'd become distracted, she quickly deduced what had happened. Exasperated, she took the wooden slab between us and quickly placed it behind her. Grabbing her tail, she held it out towards me, her face a mixture of embarrassment and annoyance.

"Argh! You're starting to really get on my nerves! Here! Are you gonna do it or not?!"

Suddenly losing my nerve, I couldn't help but stammer. "I-I— Well, it was just something that—"

Grabbing my hand, she ripped off the glove and placed it on her tail. I was immediately surprised by how soft it was. The whole thing was red, just like her hair, however, the tip was colored a bit darker. The hair, or fur, or whatever this was wasn't the same as a wolf's, it was much softer. As my hand sank deeper into it, I couldn't help but think how great a blanket made of this stuff would be for the winter.

It'd feel like heaven to bury my face in it.

Before my mind could come up with other strange ideas, I suddenly felt the part of the tail where the flesh and bone was. Rosalia flinched and the moment I gently squeezed it she proceeded to slap my hand away. Moving back, she seemed to be shocked by my action.

"O-Okay! No more!" Her face was incredibly red to the point where she almost resembled an apple. I couldn't tell if it was out of embarrassment or anger.

"I'm sorry!" I quickly apologized. "I didn't mean to do anything to harm you."

"You didn't, you—It's fine." Slowly, she brought her tail forward once more and began smoothing its fur. "I didn't mean to scare you. You just caught me by surprise was all. Wasn't it weird for you too? I didn't even think about it until now, but I plucked one of your feathers out and you barely reacted."

“That’s because I can’t really feel it. For me, it’s similar to how you barely feel your own hair. I suppose if they were destroyed I might feel something stronger, but otherwise it’s almost non-existent when it comes to sensation.”

“Oh... so that’s what you meant when you said it didn’t *harm* you.”

There was an awkward silence that proceeded in which I didn’t know what to say and Rosalia seemed to be begging me to break it.

Is she angry with me?

“I...” I thought aloud before realizing that this was my opportunity to exit this situation. “I’m going to stretch my legs for a bit. Maia told me to do so every once in a while.” Although it was a complete lie, it led to me remembering something once I stood up and saw the table. “Actually, I’ll clean the table while I’m at it.”

“I can help!” She said, getting up and rushing over before covering her nose once more.

“Are you sure you can do this?”

“Of course I—” She gagged and in response I immediately backed away as fast as I could.

“Please don’t vomit. I don’t think I’ll be able to stomach cleaning both blood and bile.”

“But I—”

“I can do this alone, please don’t worry! Just—Whatever you do, just go somewhere else.”

Not being able to put up much of an argument, she did as I asked while I resumed my task. Although I mostly just tried to remove the blood from the table, some of it was soaked so deeply that no amount of scrubbing really changed much. As such, I simply wiped what was on the surface. Although Maia never asked me to do this, and we’d be leaving this place soon, I thought this would be a good way to force myself to move around and perhaps show a bit of my appreciation to her. As I went to pick up the bucket filled with dirty water to empty outside, I found myself unable to lift it. The exertion from the attempt alone made me lightheaded. Fighting through this feeling, I steadied myself on the table.

After taking a few breaths, I was able to at least finish gathering the rags and random bandages that were lying around. Every time I had to get something from off the floor, I’d need the aid of a chair to get back up. I felt like an old man with how slowly I had to move. I couldn’t help but remind myself of the Chaplain.

Although it took a while, I managed to leave the area noticeably improved by the time I’d run out of energy. Looking back over towards where the couch was, I realized Rosalia had been watching me, perhaps the entire time. Almost immediately, she ducked and hid from my sight. I suppose she was still dutifully carrying out her task of watching over me, but her actions were still a bit strange to me.

Walking back, I was hit with another spell of dizziness. All at once, the weight of my exhaustion seemed to hit me. Making it back was now something I wasn’t sure I’d be able to do. How long would I remain this weak? I wish I knew what was wrong with me. The sound of footsteps alerted

me to Rosalia rushing over to help me. Using her as a makeshift support, I leaned on her to keep myself up. One step at a time, we slowly made our way back until I could finally lie back down.

When I caught my breath, I couldn't help but ask, "Were you watching me because of your task or were you just bored?"

"A little of both, but I mostly just wanted to make sure you weren't going to hurt yourself."

"Thank you for the help. I'm sure Maia would be pleased as well that you're taking your task seriously.."

She didn't seem to like me mentioning Maia. "I don't care about that. You're my friend, dummy. I was worried about you." Although I was surprised by her kind words, they were still hard to trust. Noticing my lack of a reply, she spoke up once more. "Are you tired?"

"I wouldn't be lying down if I wasn't." It came off a bit rude, but the mixture of pain and fatigue was wearing on my patience. Maybe trying to clean everything by myself was a bad idea. Seeing that Rosalia was simply standing there, I felt a bit awkward just having her watch me. "You know, you don't have to stand there and monitor me. You're free to go do something else. I'll call you if I need anything... Just please don't cause any trouble."

Coming much closer, she leaned in and tried to stare at me through my face covering. "But you don't look so good."

"How can you tell whether I look good or bad? Even from this distance you shouldn't be able to see my face... Actually, I don't feel like having this debate. Just let me rest for a while."

"Wait, let me get you all nice and comfy. You're probably just grumpy 'cause you're tired." She proceeded to grab the blanket and cover me with it.

"I'm not a child."

She ignored my comment and began to tuck the blanket snugly against me. It was rather embarrassing to be treated like this, however, I didn't entirely dislike it either. More than anything, I was just confused by her actions. I could have done this by myself. Do I really seem so weak that she felt the need to do this?

Whatever the case was, I could feel my eyelids becoming heavy. Being so comfortable, I just couldn't help it. All my problems felt as though they were slowly drifting away. I'd barely closed my eyes when I suddenly felt my legs being lifted. Startled, I looked over to see Rosalia quickly duck beneath the blanket, sitting herself on the opposite end of the couch before letting my legs, and blanket, fall atop of her lap.

Before I could say anything, she closed her eyes and feigned sleep. What was she doing? I thought of questioning her about it until I realized how wonderful it felt to have the warmth of her body right next to my feet. Was she trying to keep me warm? She didn't have to do all of this... This could just be a strategy to make me forgive her sooner.

Or perhaps... Is this genuine kindness?

I suppose I'm weak to such gestures because I feel my heart softening a bit towards her. She's different from Maia, and I suppose all people are different in their own way, but she exudes a certain aura that makes me feel comfortable, even in these strange situations. I never thought I'd feel this peace from having someone sleep so close to me, but I do. The barracks were never like this.

She's soft and warm.

She's kind.

It's hard to dislike her... but it's also hard to trust her again.

The wind outside would pick up occasionally, blowing leaves and random debris against the house producing small noises. Aside from this, however, there was only quiet. A heavenly silence that lulled me to the brink of sleep as I fought back against it to try and stay in this moment for just a bit longer.

Is this what happiness feels like?

It was the first time I've genuinely had to ask myself this. I can't say for certain, but it feels like the opposite of what I experienced in the prison. Whatever this feeling is, it's pleasant. Finally losing my battle, I drifted off to sleep. I knew not of what would await me when I opened my eyes, but for the time being, I left such worries for later.

The Cogs of Gods: Chapter X
Heaven and Hell

As I often do, I had no dreams as I slept. What felt like an hour of rest had in reality been much longer. When I finally awoke, there was barely any light in the room. The setting sun was peeking through the leaves of the nearby trees, sending scattered rays of light into the room. In this soft lighting, I managed to see Rosalia writing in a small book she held in her hand. Noticing my gaze, she turned around and smiled while quickly hiding the book in her jacket before buttoning it back up.

“Hey sleepy, ya feeling better?”

“I am. Thank you for not waking me... I may have just been tired after all.”

“Mhm, told you. By the way, did you know you snore when you sleep?”

“I do?”

She slapped my foot playfully. “I’m just messing with ya, you’re actually really quiet. I could barely hear you sometimes... It sorta freaks me out when you do that.”

“Ah, sorry, I never knew...” As I cleared my throat to avoid an awkward silence, a thought occurred to me. “Say, Rosalia, have you really been sitting there the whole time?”

“Yeah, why? I didn’t wanna wake you up so I’ve just been sitting here for a while.” After a brief period of silence, she clarified. “I took a nap too, so don’t think I’ve been sitting here for hours doing nothing like some weirdo! When I woke up you were still sleeping. If I moved you might wake up, so I didn’t. The more you sleep, the better you’ll get, right?”

“I hope so.”

Before I could ask what that book she had been writing in was, her head snapped to the front door. The look on her face instantly told me something was wrong. In response, I sat up as fast as I could in anticipation despite not really being able to do much.

The footsteps were the first thing I recognized. They easily broke the silence as they caused the wooden steps outside to squeak under the great weight put upon them. Soon after, a large figure could be seen through the front window before bursting in through the door a second later. Despite having already known who it was, I couldn’t help but feel my stomach tighten as I saw his large frame fill the room. Turning to Rosalia, I could see the color in her face drain as she stared up at him. She seemed frozen in pure terror.

“Hello!” The Toma suddenly said in a fairly jovial voice as he closed the door behind him. “I have brought many good things for us all!”

Rosalia and I looked at each other, unsure of what to say or do. I could tell that she was still traumatized from her past interactions with Tomas. In all honesty, I wasn’t much of a fan of them either, but it was rude to not say anything.

“W-What sort of things have you brought?” My worry of seeing another kidnapped person clearly leaked into my voice.

He walked over and dropped the bag in front of us. The resulting noise made it clear that it had been filled with various objects made of metal. I was rather confused until he opened the front of the sack and showed us all the various weapons he had smuggled for us.

“Look inside, take whatever you are needing. I will use what is left.”

I wasn't sure if he was being generous or if he was just very sure of his abilities. Whatever his reason, I did as he asked and slowly got up from the couch. Sitting on the floor, I looked to see that the man had taken a random selection from the Academy's armory.

“Won't they notice it's missing?” I asked.

“No.” He replied rather flatly before adding, “At least for small time. I am one of few who watch armory. Excuses can buy time. We'll be gone before it is big issue.”

As I reached into the bag, being careful not to cut myself on anything, I took a longsword to examine it. Holding it to the light, I immediately noticed that the blade was chipped. I thought perhaps this was a single damaged item but as I examined the others, I found that they were in similar states of disrepair.

Pointing to the deep scratch marks on a dagger, I proceeded to ask the Toma why they were all in this condition. As the giant stared down at me, I almost regretted asking. Despite this intimidating presence, he responded with kindness in his voice.

“Ah, you notice. I wanted to bring much better things, but there is danger to doing so. These are weapons used for training. New recruits are not going to be coming for at least rest of year. Since they are unused, less chance a few missing will be noticeable. Condition is... err, not *so* good, but still usable. Saying all this, fighting is *only* final option. Maia is smart and resourceful. I trust she can do this safely.” Sudding flexing his arm he boasted, “But if there is need, you have *STRONGEST* champion in all of Academy!”

“That's... Good to know.” I responded, since I could tell Rosalia wasn't going to be speaking anytime soon.

Although he wasn't exactly what I expected in demeanor, it was hard to imagine he wouldn't be freakishly strong. Already, he had carried back a small arsenal for us. There was a longsword, three short swords, a bow along with some arrows but no quiver, four daggers, and a buckler. The blades had sheathes, but some of the ones for the daggers were degraded to the point of allowing the blade to stick out and slice your hand if you weren't careful. It was a miracle he hadn't stabbed himself while carrying all this back. Near the bottom of the bag, I also found a wrapped spearhead whose shaft was broken, sadly rendering the whole thing mostly useless.

“Do you mind if I take the buckler?” I asked, hoping for the Toma to keep true to his word.

“Of course, it is fine to take anything. Buckler is too small for me anyway!” He bellowed while moving his forearm closer, emphasizing the fact that it would look more like an oversized bracelet if he tried to use it. “All I ask is for sword. Dagger and bow are too small for me.”

Considering bows made for Tomas were uncommon due to the materials needed to make them, I didn’t really expect him to want the bow. If anything, he’d likely snap it in half if he drew it with his full strength. I suppose I could use it, but more than likely I’ll also be on the front lines should anything happen. Hopefully, one of the girls will be able to use this thing. If not, the least they can do is carry it so we can use it for hunting in the future. As for the lack of a quiver, I’m sure they’ll figure something out.

Looking at the broken spear, I couldn’t help but think what a loss it was. It would have been a great weapon for someone like me. Settling for the next best thing, I grabbed the longsword and motioned for Rosalia to come take a look. After she hesitantly approached and began looking through the bag, I quickly noticed she seemed to be inexperienced in handling weapons. She nearly cut herself on one of the daggers and after that, she held each item as though the slightest error would take her hand off. More and more I question why they put someone like her in a combat role.

Clearly, she was better suited as a Supporter, and yet even after the ceremony, they still had her in a black uniform. I’ll admit that at least this time they gave her one that fit properly, but what exactly was their end goal? Were they simply waiting for her to endanger herself? Her sister was made a Supporter instead, that’s strange. Stranger yet was the fact that the previous Academy seemingly hadn’t taught her anything about arms. Despite being Supporters, our white uniformed Cogs could still defend themselves as they were forced to participate in some of our training. Perhaps things were entirely different in the East. Was it more peaceful over there? Whatever the reason, for now it would be best if she hid at any sight of combat. In time, I’ll have to teach her, and likely her sister as well, how to defend themselves.

Not wanting her to grab anything that would endanger her life, or mine for that matter, I handed her a dagger. It wouldn’t be much use in an actual fight, but at the very least it was a deterrent. Giving her anything else would just be an unnecessary burden that could potentially cause an accident. I should have realized Rosalia didn’t have the makings of a fighter. The question now became whether I could protect two people who had basically no combat capabilities. I don’t trust leaving their safety solely in the hands of the Toma, and besides that, there’s always the possibility something will happen to him. I was able to keep Rosalia safe during the ceremony, at great cost to myself. Would two people be far beyond my capabilities?

The Toma must have taken my inaction as a sign that I was done. Coming over, he seized the bag and looked inside. For himself, he took a shortsword and the most damaged dagger. The last two, he handed over.

“Keep one for yourself. The other give to *blonde-haired* girl when she comes back.”

Is that the term for her hair color? It was the first time I'd heard such a word. "Where did Maia take her?" I asked.

"Maia took her to prison hidden in mountain. Same place she found you."

Rosalia suddenly stood up as if she were ready to sprint out the door. Grabbing her wrist, I felt her immediately stop in order to not yank me. Looking back towards me, she seemed to be begging me to let her go. I refused to do so and instead she began angrily questioning the Toma.

"What do you mean she took her to that prison?! What is she planning to do? Tell me right now or I'll—"

"Relax!" The Toma shouted while getting up to block the path to the front door. "Your friend is fine. She is needed and Maia is not bad person. I promise you, she will keep her safe. For plan, she was needed today. There is passage out of Academy in prison. She will tell you more later."

I tugged on Rosalia's arm, urging her to sit back down. While she obeyed, I could tell she was still conflicted.

"Even if you tell me that, it doesn't make me feel better. Why'd it have to be *there* of all places? Wasn't there a better place for us to escape from? I feel like we deserve to know!"

"Okay, Okay." He said, sitting down on the floor as well in an attempt to seem less imposing. "Plan is complicated, and I don't know all parts, but prison passage is safest way. I promise Maia will not let harm come to her. We need both you two alive and well for escape."

Seeing Rosalia still eye the door, I spoke up in her place. "It's somewhat hard to take your word when you kidnapped both of them this morning. That's not exactly a *harmless* way of doing things."

The Toma sighed and scratched the back of his head, obviously embarrassed about the situation. "Yes... Not best thing to do, but *right* thing to do. How could I convince them to follow? If I failed, chance may not happen again. Maybe even *I* get questioned for strange actions. I did not like it as much as you did." He removed his ripped glove and showed the back of his hand to Rosalia who shrunk away behind me. The clear bite mark was still visible and only accentuated by the stitches. "I will need new glove before leaving. But in the end, it is all good, no?"

Feeling pressured by her lack of response, I responded instead. "Well, I thank you for not hurting her."

Leaning in closer, he tried speaking to Rosalia directly. "What about you little girl? Do you forgive me? I did not want to scare you."

Popping back out, she looked up at his hooded face before looking back down again. "I... I guess I do. Sorry, for biting you."

"I've had much worse!" He said laughing before removing his hood. His face was covered in various scars. The largest being on his cheek, which ran almost to his ear. "Still, I should have expected this. Shinrins always fight with tooth and nail."

"You've fought them before?" I asked, my interest piqued by this information.

He nodded his head. "They like to attack in big groups. Almost, I never see them alone. Maybe they don't like it?" Realizing I was still holding onto Rosalia's wrist, I let go. "How do you know the little one?"

Seeming to have calmed down, she spoke to the Toma directly. "We met during the ceremony. He ended up saving me so I've been his friend ever since... a lot of other things happened, but that's kinda the simple version."

"So very recent then? Interesting, but I should know this already. Eastern peoples have come before, but you are young and this was years ago. I am also not from here, but I do not remember where I came from... Or much of past in general."

Confused by this, I asked him to clarify. "I thought older members didn't have their memories erased in the same way we have. Why would they do it to you?"

"I tried escaping." He admitted plainly. "I killed other members in process. Normally, they would execute, but around same time was when your generation began. I am one of best fighters here, so it would be waste to kill me. Same thing done to *you* was done to *me*."

"But you're still trying to escape." I said, calling out the obvious.

"Yes I am. Older members stay because life outside is difficult. Here there is always food and bed. If we are injured and cannot fight, Academy still gives us place and thing to do. I tried to leave because I had clue of wife's location. Older Cogs used to have chance to leave, but Academy has changed. Even so, I try anyway. I fail, memory wiped, but most precious memories stayed. I still remember wife... Now, I will try once more. This time with help of Maia and rest of you. It *will* work this time."

Not wanting to question his confidence in the plan, I remained quiet. Rosalia, on the other hand, came forward.

"I've got a question... What was your wife's name? Maybe it'll help us find her."

"I... I do not remember." The Toma replied, the sadness clearly visible in both his voice and face. "I was captured when younger. Brought over ocean to desert and made slave. I met her there, but I don't remember how or why I came here to Academy. I even forget how we were married, but I *do* know we were married."

"Oh... Well, I'm sure you'll recognize her when we see her!"

"I hope so." He seemed to force a smile for Rosalia's sake. "I still remember voice and color of hair, it was a very dark black... but, when I think of face and other things... It all becomes blur."

Nodding along with what he said, I understood his pain and frustration. "Well, that's how it seems to be for a lot of our memories. At least, those we haven't completely forgotten."

Adding to this, Rosalia asked, "Is there any way for our memories to come back? I probably remember the most, but almost everything about my life when I was a kid is gone."

“You’re still a child.” I responded, unable to keep the comment to myself. In response Rosalia pinched me which seemed to lighten the Toma’s mood as he saw it.

“If it comes back or no, I know enough. I have idea of where to look and Maia agreed to help. On way to the East, we will be stopping to look for her.”

“Where exactly are we going once we escape? Does Maia already have a plan for this too?” I asked, seeing this as an opportunity to learn more.

The Toma made a strange gesture with his hand, holding it flat, palm down, and tilting it side to side. “We know end of journey and ways to get there. Finding wife means taking other paths. We do know next area for sure though. It is dangerous place, but will save us many months of walking. It is called, *The Southern Great Swamp*, but is also called, *Swamp of Sorrows*.”

“Wait, what’s with the creepy name?” Rosalia asked, clearly disturbed.

“Swamp is *cursed*.” He didn’t seem to be trying to scare us as he said it without a hint of insincerity. “I’ve been once only. Anyone who enters, even if they have been before, becomes sick. Weakness, fever, sometimes vomiting, these are symptoms. Also there are—” Seeing how scared he was making Rosalia he stopped. “But do not worry. I have been before. I will guide and help. There is village on other side of swamp that will be friendly. Maia has person there to give us passage on boat that will leave Onar Isla and head south.”

The name seemed to trigger something within me. “*Onar Isla*... The name sounds vaguely familiar.”

“It is land we are on, Austacia is—was a kingdom inside. It is mostly land of Soras, but Tomas came to live in southern kingdoms before war. Anyways, getting back to previous saying, we will head south of here, then into swamp and then towards village which has large port on coast. From there, we take boat and go further south.”

Hoping he would reveal more, I asked, “And what’s south of this land?”

“Most is desert. War between Gods destroyed much of south, but south is where I last remember wife being. Journey will take maybe year in total to go find wife and then get other boat to go east. Do not worry of me leaving. I promised Maia to help until end, even if I find her. It is how I repay her for so much help... but it is not fair to you, no? What are you wanting when you are free? Maybe I can help.”

Rosalia and I looked at each other for a moment, not really sure on what to say. Sensing that I had nothing to respond with yet, she finally spoke up in my place. “I’m not really sure, I just don’t wanna be here. Anywhere else is better than this place, right? It’d be nice to go somewhere with good food and lots of fun things to do. A big house to live in would be the dream, but a small one like this isn’t bad either. The house has to have a library though, or at least somewhere to put books in, even if I gotta stuff them under my bed I’ll do it... But that’s more like a best case scenario. I guess as long as

there's no war or fighting, that'd be good enough to start off with. There's gotta be a place like that outside of here, isn't there?"

"There are still places with peace... mostly." Reko replied, somewhat encouraging her idea. Turning to me he asked, "And what about you?"

"Well, I'm not exactly sure either... I have no memories of my past life and I don't have any family to return to either. All I want is to be free, to fly and see the world. It would be nice to see what peace looks like, but all I know is what I was taught here. To be honest, I might not be of any use other than as a soldier. For the time being, I suppose that's useful, but once this journey is over..."

Reko seemed pensive before replying with, "Important thing is that you will be free, no? You are young. You have entire life ahead. Eventually you will find place where you belong, with person you love. That is what life is for. If Gods watch us, then we can all have this life. I will help, at least to find safe place for you all."

"I suppose so." Although I didn't want to dismiss him, I couldn't fool myself into believing such a thing would be easy. I'm a strange person, in a strange position, in an unsure world. It's hard to imagine myself being able to settle down and live a normal life.

"You can always come live with us!" Rosalia said encouragingly, her arm leaning on my shoulder as she nudged me gently. "Even if you decide to go your own way, it'd be nice if you could still visit us. We're gonna stay friends after all so that means you've got no choice!"

My hesitation to respond caused the Toma to chuckle. "It's good to have friends, err... What is your name, little one? Do you remember?"

"It's Rosalia." She answered before pointing to me. "And he's Captain."

"*Captain?*" Judging by the way he said my name, I could tell my worries about it were not in vain. "This was your name before or—"

"I gave it to him. Since he didn't have one, it made sense to make one up. I think it suits him pretty well, doesn't it?"

Unable to speak his true feelings, the Toma simply nodded while doing his best to hold back the smile growing on his face as he noticed me sigh in frustration. "I'll be sure to tell Maia. She did not know you had name." Extending his hand, the Toma held it in front of me. "My name is Reko. It is nice to be meeting both of you... Well, for second time."

Although I wasn't sure what to do with this gesture, I copied it and soon found that he took my hand and shook it. Doing the same to Rosalia, he was able to basically wrap his hand entirely around hers and nearly shook her entire body despite not being aggressive. We'd barely finished this strange meeting when Rosalia suddenly tapped my shoulder and pointed at the door. A moment later there came three quick knocks.

Reko's eyes widened as he quickly got to his feet, grabbing one of the swords from the bag he'd carried in. Seeing this, I gripped the sword I'd taken, even if I wouldn't be much use in a fight. We held

our breath as Reko inched his way closer to the door. Just as he was readying his weapon to strike, the door slowly creaked open and a white hooded figure poked their head through hesitantly. Upon seeing all of us staring, they froze in place. With a collective sigh of relief, the Toma put the weapon away while Rosalia and I let our guard down.

“You don’t have to knock. It’s *my* house and the only people that would be inside are the idiots you already know, more or less. Go in and rest up while I handle things.”

Maia’s voice could clearly be heard behind the girl as she gently pushed her inside. Awkwardly stepping in, the girl removed her hood, letting her golden hair spill out.

Will I be able to speak to her?

I hope I get the chance to.

Senga was her name, as far as I recall. Rosalia separated from me the moment she recognized who it was. For some reason, she seemed anxious, but I couldn’t tell if it was from Maia’s presence or her sister’s.

As Maia came inside, she immediately took off her hood and flung it at the couch. With a big stretch and a yawn, she then closed the door behind her and seemed to relax for a moment before suddenly locking her eyes onto Rosalia and I. She seemed to try and read the situation before motioning with one finger for me to come over to her. Just as I was about to get up, she stopped me.

“Not you, the other one.” Rosalia pointed to herself, obviously confused. “Mhm, come here for a second, sweetie. I promise I won’t bite.”

Looking back at me for reassurance, I nodded and off she went. Although I couldn’t make out what they were saying, I could tell Rosalia was very nervous around Maia. Initially, I thought this would only enkindle Maia’s weirder tendencies, however, she didn’t seem to bully her in any way. If anything, she almost seemed to be genuinely kind to her.

Once they were done speaking, she sent Rosalia away to join Senga who was already in Maia’s room. Focusing on Reko next, they shared a brief exchange as they more or less seemed to report on the progress they’d made on their respective tasks. At least that’s what I understood based on the snippets I managed to overhear. At times they would speak in whispers so that I couldn’t listen in, which aroused some suspicion within me, but by the end of their conversation they seemed to be in a good mood so at least things seemed to be going well. After bidding one another goodbye, Reko waved at me before leaving. Upon his exit, it started to become quite clear to me that Maia had purposely sent the others away. I was unsure of why she’d chosen to isolate me. All I knew is that a good and bad possibility were both equally as likely.

“You happy to see me?” She suddenly jumped onto the couch, landing on her rear before motioning for me to come sit next to her. Although I didn’t let my guard down, she seemed more playful than threatening which was an interesting change. “It always puts me in a good mood when things go the way I want them to. You did just as I told you to and you know what? That makes me feel

like I made the right choice. Now come over here and take a seat. It's about time we start tonight's healing session."

Reaching her hand out to me, she helped me onto the couch and told me to face my back towards her. Tugging on the collar of my jacket, I already knew what she wanted me to do. Despite removing the top half of my uniform, I kept my hood. Even though I've grown a bit more used to this, I didn't feel comfortable having everything taken off. It's strange how I feel more discomfort being like this around Maia than other Medics. Was it simply because I knew her? As the healing began, I felt the warmth spread throughout my body. Despite having only woken up a while ago, I felt as though I could drift off to sleep once more if given the chance.

Breaking me out of my peaceful trance, Maia suddenly began to speak. "I noticed you're moving better than you did yesterday. Quick recovery aside, looks like you're really taking to my healing. It's sweet to know you trust me so much."

"What do you mean?"

"Things that affect the body and the soul like this work better if there's some level of trust. When we first met, Reko didn't like me so my healing wasn't as effective on him. I can still brute force it, but it takes more energy which makes for a worse end result. There's other factors, like age, race, and even gender, but what I'm getting at is that your response says a lot about you. Whether you realize it or not, you've got a soft spot for me, don't you?"

Upon her saying this, my body tensed up and she immediately noticed which made her chuckle. I could feel my cheeks burn with embarrassment, but even in this state I still tried to deny her accusation. "I'm simply grateful for you having helped me."

"Sure." She said teasingly before adding, "You know, you sort of remind me of myself when I was your age."

"*When I was your age?* How old are you?"

"You're not supposed to ask a woman that, kid. Most of them will get offended if you're not smart about it... Still, since I know it's an innocent question, I'll give you a hint. I'm an adult, but I'm below twenty. I know it's hard to tell because of how well put together I am, but can you look at a beautiful face like mine and say I'm not a pretty young girl?" Stopping her healing, she leaned in close, grabbing my face and forcing me to look at her. "Be honest, you have to admit I'm pretty, right?"

"I—Why do you care?"

"Because all girls like being told they're beautiful. If you don't believe me, try it out on your little friend. I'm sure it'll get a big reaction from her."

She's so close, again.

Her body is pressed against me.

It's... strangely enjoyable.

Suddenly backing away, she seemed to rethink her comment. “Actually, maybe it’s better for you not to do that right now. Especially not around the older one and especially not *to* the older one. I don’t need you two starting a fight.”

“A fight? I wasn’t going to take your suggestion seriously, but is there a reason? Has she said anything about me?” Just as I realized I’d given away my interest in her, I quickly tried to amend my reason for asking. “She seems a bit cold towards me despite us never having interacted before. I can tell just by looking at her. I understand she’s upset about what happened, but then surely she’d be even more angry with you. Do you think—”

“You really have no idea, do you?” She turned my head forward and resumed her healing. It seemed to take her a moment before she could continue speaking. “I know you’re dense, but you can’t be that unaware.”

“I really don’t know... Is it because of Rosalia?”

“Well, I can’t say for sure, but that’d be my best guess. She’s really protective of her, so a stranger like you trying to get close screams *danger*. You’re a random boy who suddenly appeared and got them mixed up in all kinds of trouble. It might not be your fault, but that’s a good enough reason to not like you.”

“That’s rather harsh...”

“Still, those girls seem sweet. As long as you don’t do anything stupid, then I doubt she’ll have any reason to treat you badly. If anything, she might just be worried you’re going to steal her friend away from her.”

“*Steal* her? It’s not as if I’m trying to take Rosalia away from her. We’ve barely mended things as is and I still have some doubts. Senga shouldn’t worry herself over Rosalia. Quite honestly, I wouldn’t mind befriending Senga. She doesn’t seem to be malicious, just a bit guarded.”

“Yeah, I could see why you’d want to *befriend* her.”

“What?”

Instead of clarifying, she went back to our earlier conversation. “You remember how I asked you if I was pretty?” It seemed like one of those questions that didn’t need an answer as she simply continued speaking. “Even if your lack of memories affects your sense of self, you’re still a boy. It’s not wrong for you to think of us in those ways you know, it’s natural.”

By now I’d noticed her healing had stopped and she instead leaned against my back. At first I thought she was purposely leaning her breasts against me again, however, I soon realized she was wrapping me in an embrace. For a moment I was worried, but soon after I felt her cheek coming to rest against mine. Not knowing what to do, I stayed in place, still as a statue in her arms. There wasn’t a hint of malice in her actions, not even to tease me. It felt like genuine affection.

“M-Maia?” I finally managed to say aloud, almost as an attempt to get her to say something.

“What, you’ve never been hugged before?” She squeezed me a bit tighter “You did a good job today and I’m happy. There’s nothing wrong with a hug. Or... Do you want me to do something else?”

“No, I’m fine!” I quickly replied, my voice higher pitched than normal to my own surprise and her amusement.

She began trying to lift my face covering which prompted me to stop her, however, she was faster than I thought and somehow managed to catch my hand. Stuck in a half-way turned position, she used this to her advantage as she leaned her weight onto me, forcing my hand away. Struggling with this, she used it to her advantage and grabbed hold of my face covering, yanking it off. The moment I felt this happen, I turned away, expecting her to continue her harassment, but to my relief, she relented. Instead, she tossed the hood back onto my face while proudly proclaiming, “I win” as she let out an unexpectedly cheerful giggle. She was behaving almost like Rosalia. It was a strange turn in her personality, but not something I disliked as I preferred it to her previous harassment.

Covering my face, I felt more comfortable turning back to look at her. “You’re stronger than I thought you’d be.” I admitted, half trying to rationalize why she’d bested me and half accidentally feeding into her ego, which was indicated by the smug look on her face. Despite this look of assurance, she was breathing heavily, but then again, so was I. Both of us seemed drained due to the different strains our bodies have been under before this wrestling match. As far as I could tell, she was done healing me for the night. Once she’d caught her breath, she flopped down on her back and stared up at the ceiling before giving a loud yawn. Getting into a more comfortable position, I sat with my back resting against the support of the couch. Grabbing my jacket, I put it back on.

Without prompting, she began speaking aloud. “You know, before coming here, I used to travel all alone. I’ve been through a lot of cities, towns, and villages that are in different degrees of decay. It’s rare when a place isn’t messed up in some way. The Academy has a lot of problems, but at the very least they’ve treated me decently outside of taking away my freedom. The world outside isn’t kind, especially if you’re a woman, and even more so if you’re a beautiful one like me.” Despite the compliment to herself, she didn’t have the same cocky smile as usual. “If I’m being honest for a moment, I know it makes you uncomfortable, but screwing around with you reminds me of when life was a lot more simple. You might think you’re different from the people outside these walls, but I’d say it’s not by much. You’re like any other boy your age, scared of showing your true feelings and still with some of that childhood innocence fighting back against the fact that you’re becoming a man. Even with your memories gone, you’re a far cry from being a *normal* Cog.” Sitting up, she leaned closer towards me. “I will say though, you’re always so damn serious. It wouldn’t kill you to lighten up a little. Were you always like this? Makes me wonder. Doesn’t help that you always have this stupid thing on.” She reached once more for my hood and when I went to stop her hand, she instead poked my ribs with her finger which made me flinch in pain. “Ah shit! Sorry about that. I meant to aim lower.”

“Shouldn’t you go and rest?” I asked, hoping to calm her before she began harassing me again. “Unlike me, you seem to be fairly busy. If anything, you could be using this time to prepare for the escape instead.”

“Cut me a little slack.” She said as she visibly waved away my concern. “I could make a million plans and think through a million different scenarios, but in the end I can’t tell the future. If this plan fails, I’ll die too. The girls will likely be spared and Reko might be able to talk his way out of execution, but you and I won’t be so lucky. You’d think knowing that would make me stressed, but... Well, if anything it just makes me want to appreciate the time we have left before all of this is gone forever. You might not know what you want to do with your life, but I have some important things I need to take care of. That means I’m serious about making it out of here. But there’s always a chance...”

Seeing the doubt creeping into her, I tried to ease her worry. “I may not be in good condition, but if I can be of assistance, you need just ask.”

Maia gave a brief chuckle before shaking her head. “I need you to rest up and get better. You’re no use to any of us if you’re still injured by then.” She dropped her cheerful demeanor and spoke to me seriously. “If something happens and we have to leave early, you’re going to need to keep up. If not, we’ll have to leave you behind or risk the entire group.”

“I understand...”

“For what little it means, I’d prefer if you didn’t die. I’ve done a lot of things I’m not proud of, some things you’ll probably learn about in the near future, but I don’t want any of your deaths to be added onto that.”

Although it wasn’t filled with sweet words, the meaning behind it was well received by me. “Maia.” She continued looking at me, waiting for the rest of my response. “...Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For saving me... and for taking care of me. Even should things end badly, I won’t hold it against you. At the very least, this is a lot better than dying all alone in that prison.”

Her face softened and for the first time I saw a very sweet smile come to her face. She looked away from me and tried to laugh off my comment.

“Gods, maybe I was wrong about you. A few nice words and you turn into mush. You’re such a tender-hearted kid, aren’t you?” She began laughing at my expense before calming herself down. “If you think I’m not going to do everything I can think of to get us out of here, you’re wrong. We’ll make it out somehow. Just give me more time to work out all the kinks while you get some rest.”

“Alright... Try and get some rest as well.”

“Don’t worry about me. I’ll see you in the morning.” As she was about to head into the hall she suddenly turned back around, a smirk clearly on her face. “Goodnight, *Captain*.”

I couldn't even reply, not like she bothered waiting for one anyway. However she had found it out, that name seemed to now be forever etched into my being. Whether I liked it or not, from this day on, all who knew me would know me by the name, *Captain*.

It's a strange name. But at least it's *my* name.

Chapter X
Alone, Together

“Do you mind passing me another spool?” My words seemingly went into the void as there wasn’t even a hint of acknowledgement. I debated as to whether I should even ask again. It’s far too quiet for her to have not heard me so it’s obvious she’s ignoring me, but is she really going to keep this up the entire time? I thought that having a chance to speak to her would have been a blessing, but now I’m not so sure. Just as I was building up the courage to ask again, the golden-haired girl silently passed me what I requested without so much as looking at me. Somehow this felt worse, as if I were inconveniencing her with my mere presence. In an effort to save this interaction, I complimented the clay balls she had finished making. Once again no reply. .

I feel like a damn ghost.

This difficult situation was what I was left with after I woke up this morning and realized that everyone had left except for her. I knew that Maia was going to take Rosalia with her, but I failed to realize that this meant I’d be alone with Senga all day. The moment I opened my eyes, I saw that she was sitting on the ground nearby. She had a large sack of clay next to her, a bucket of water, and a bunch of clay pieces that had already been neatly formed into hollow balls lying all around her. All I could guess is that this was a task Maia had left for her.

From the moment I awoke, she would occasionally glance over in my direction as if I were some sort of wild animal she had to keep track of. She had ignored my initial attempts to say hello which led to an unbearable awkwardness that forced me to leave the scene, if at least for a moment. Having made my way to the kitchen, all I could do was gather my food while trying to come up with a plan. Looking at the small amount of food left, the girl and Rosalia must have already eaten their shares. I wouldn’t go hungry, but it would have been nice if more was left for me.

Eating alone at the stained table, I was surrounded by silence which was something I wasn’t used to. The mess hall was always noisy with bowls clattering against tables, the loud footsteps of Tomas, and the occasional conversations Cogs would have that were usually just surface level observations. It all blended together into a sort of droning noise that was soothing in its own way. In stark contrast to that, I could hear every minor noise that came from my chewing and swallowing. The occasional sounds that Senga would make only added to my feeling of isolation as it would remind me that someone was here but was actively avoiding me. In many ways, this was somehow more torturous than when nobody knew who I was.

In an effort to assuage this unpleasant feeling, I called out to her. “Have you eaten yet?” Despite already knowing the answer.

There was a lengthy silence, however, as if forced to respond she finally caved in. “I have,” she replied.

“Ah, alright then.”

Why did I bother?

It's so awkward, it's painful.

My lack of anything interesting to say killed my opportunity to get more from her. Then again, what sort of conversation could have realistically been had when we were halfway across the house from each other?

Finishing the rest of my meal, I downed a cup of water and went to see what she was doing. Approaching her once again, she briefly looked at me and then went back to her task. Despite how purposefully distant she was, it somehow had the opposite effect on me as it only made me more curious about her. Also, as much as I hate to admit it, Maia was right in her assessment of me last night. I can't help but be attracted by her beauty, even if I refuse to admit it out loud, and even if she seems to want nothing to do with me.

Building up the courage to speak once more, I finally asked, “What are you doing?”

“Don't step on them.” Was all she said before ignoring me once more. Standing there, I didn't know what else I could say. For now, I carefully made my way back onto the couch to formulate better questions. As I watched her work, I realized that I could help her with this simple task, however, when I brought this up to her she replied with a simple, *no*. Dejected, I went back to thinking of questions and occasionally looking out the window to ease my mind. The trees were swaying in the breeze and the sky was mostly clear today. If I could, it would have been nice to spend the day outside.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed that Senga was staring at me. Turning my head, I realized that my eyes weren't playing tricks on me, she seemed to want something. In contrast to the others, her face didn't show much emotion. All I had were her words to rely on if I wanted to know how she felt. This was made even worse by the fact that she kept her sentences short.

“Do you know how to braid a rope?” She asked.

“I can't say I've ever done that.”

“Then nevermind.”

I should have said I could!

I'm an idiot!

As she went back to working, I nearly punched my own cheek out of frustration. I could have figured out how to braid a rope... Then again, I could have failed and made a fool of myself. Perhaps it's best to not try and force these interactions. Just because I missed an opportunity doesn't mean another one won't eventually come naturally.

Laying back down, I turned my head the other way and closed my eyes. Maybe a short nap would help get my mind in order. As I was waiting for sleep to take hold, a few thoughts suddenly came to me.

Why exactly would Maia want these little clay balls?

Is the rope related to it or do we simply need more rope?

Was Senga told a part of the plan that I wasn't?

As much as I tried to sleep, these random thoughts kept popping into my head, all connected to Senga. This was my first time getting to speak to her and so far it had gone nowhere. I may not be able to get along with her in the same way I do with Rosalia, but at the very least it'd be nice if she didn't ignore me. Afterall, we're going to need to interact with each other quite often in the near future. Realistically, this silence can't last forever... But really, it's terrible luck that it falls on me to get somebody else to speak.

Sitting back up, I noticed she was now baking the clay in the fireplace. I've never seen anyone make these things, so I'm not sure if this process was correct, but it certainly was interesting to watch. By now, the girl had noticed me and seemed to be growing annoyed by my observation. Despite her continued attempts to pretend I wasn't there, her frustration only grew until she was forced to speak up.

"Would you stop staring at me?"

Confused, I tried to explain myself. "There's nothing else to do and I can't sleep. I'm not trying to bother you. I'm just trying to understand what you're doing."

"You're breaking my concentration."

"Sorry... If it isn't a bother, I could help you. It seems you have a lot of things to do."

"I don't want your help and I don't want you to look at me while I work. Go stare at the window or something."

Growing tired by her constant rejections, I finally pushed back. "I haven't done or said anything to warrant such a response. Why are you being so rude to me?"

She seemed surprised. Perhaps it was due to the fact that I wasn't angry but rather genuinely wanted to know why she was acting like this. Even if I understood her initial dislike of me, this level of antagonism seemed to have another reason.

"Because I don't like you." She plainly admitted. "It's your fault that we're here. If it weren't for you, we wouldn't have gotten dragged into this."

"And if it weren't for me, Rosalia might not even be alive." Before she could reply I quickly added, "Even after what she did, I was never anywhere near as cold to her as you are to me. I know it's hard to not be resentful when you feel like you're being punished for something that isn't your fault, but none of this was my doing. Since we're going to be working together from now on, wouldn't it be better to at least be polite to one another?"

She stopped shaping the wet clay and let out a sigh. "You're so *annoying*. All I ask is for you to leave me alone. Is that so hard?" Discouraged by her response, I struggled to find my words and this only emboldened her. "And you know what? I don't even get why Rose likes you. Actually, why do *you*

even like her so much anyways? Didn't she almost get you killed? It's *creepy* how attached you are to her. Especially because you barely even know her."

I felt myself physically recoil as though I'd been slugged in the gut. It was the first time someone had ever spoken to me like this. It wasn't like the words of an instructor or even an Overseer that were stern and uncaring, these words felt incredibly personal. It was as though she could see every tender point inside of my soul to jab at. What have I done to deserve this? Feeling pressured to say something, I tried defending myself.

"It's not as if I ran into her on purpose. She just happened to be hiding in a dark corner I fell into and she caught my attention because she stood out. Until I met her, there was nobody in the Academy that was similar to me. You have no idea what it's like to be as isolated as I was. Even with everything she's done, I don't regret coming across her or trying to move on from what's happened."

"So you don't regret involving us?"

"That's not what I'm saying... Rosalia was the one who—What matters is that we have a way out now. Why can't you understand that? It may not be to your liking, but we won't survive if we stay. Do you really think *you* can keep her safe in a place like this? Maia already made this clear to you. She's in an offensive role. Even if you wanted to, as a Supporter, you have no ability to protect her. This is something you have to come to terms with and move past."

"Don't treat me like an idiot!" She snapped back. "Why do you think I'm doing these stupid tasks? I don't trust any of you... *You* specifically, I trust the least. The only reason I'm even putting up with you is because I have to. From now on, if you don't have anything important to say then don't bother me. Just looking at you puts me in a bad mood. You think you're safe behind your hood, but I can see the way you look at me. It *disgusts* me."

Is that how she views me?

How do I even respond to this?

I worried she'd reject my attempts at befriending her, but this was far worse than anything I had imagined. I was even more confused than before and worst of all, my throat and chest felt as though they were being squeezed.

Am I a disgusting person?

Maia and Rosalia have never treated me like this... Not even those in the Academy spoke to me like this.

What's wrong with her?

I don't want to be near her anymore, but I'm too injured to leave quickly. If I get up and hobble away, I'll just look ridiculous... But then again, why should I be the one to back away? She shouldn't speak to me like that. I've done nothing wrong. For the sake of this plan working, I'll try to be diplomatic at least once more.

“Senga.” As I said this, she gave me a menacing glare. “I never meant to anger you, but you’re being unfair. It’s just—” I lost my nerve for a second as I wasn’t used to confrontations of this nature. I thought of stopping for a second, but my wounded pride wouldn’t let me. “Our memories were erased. You’ve likely noticed by now, but what was done to me was more severe than you or Rosalia. I can’t help the way I am.” Swallowing the lump in my throat, I finally built up the courage to say what I’d wanted to. “To tell you the truth, the reason I was staring at you was because I’ve never seen you clearly before. To me, you—everyone is interesting in their own way. All of my memories are of people hiding their faces and bodies. Because of this, I can’t help but want to stare, even if it might be rude. Maia and Rosalia have been understanding, but you know me the least of all. I realize it might make you uncomfortable, which is why I’ve been trying to speak with you, and why I’ve endured your insults. All I want is for us to better understand each other so we don’t have issues working together.”

“I’d rather not know you.” She responded while focusing on her clay.

Feeling my anger rising, I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “That’s fine. All I wanted to do was speak to you as I have the others, but if you’re so unwilling then I can’t force you.” Seeing that I was done she simply continued working. Not wanting this conversation to die off there, I continued. “Still, I’ve not said a single bad thing about you. If you keep speaking to me like this, I won’t hold my tongue in the future. Can’t you at least pretend to be civil so that we don’t cause issues for each other? At the very least, until we escape from this place. Maia, and especially Rosalia, won’t be very happy with us if we’re openly fighting.”

The mention of Rosalia seemed to trigger her as she suddenly looked at me. Perhaps she had expected me to meet her with the same amount of vitriol she’d shown me. A part of me wondered if this had been her plan all along, to get me to say something that’d give her reason to avoid me. Maybe she even wanted to drive a wedge between Rosalia and I. Had I not been beaten over and over by the Academy throughout my time here, I may have given into her provocation.

She seemed conflicted as she tried to figure out what to say. For a moment she opened her mouth, but instantly stopped herself before saying anything. A few seconds passed before she bowed her head and let out a quick sigh. With her long hair covering her face, I couldn’t tell if there was any expression to give me a hint of her mental state.

“Okay, fine then... I’ll put up with you *until* we can get out of here. Just don’t tell Rose about this.”

I’d achieved my goal, but her selfishness made me feel bitter towards her. She only did this out of fear of upsetting Rosalia, and perhaps drawing the ire of Maia. I didn’t expect her to suddenly start caring about me, but I felt less than human in her eyes. Despite how beautiful she was, I slowly began to feel my affection for her fade. Fighting back my urge to say more, I agreed and we left it at that. With the conversation over, I assumed she’d go back to working on whatever task Maia had left her, however, she reluctantly came closer to me.

“If you’re serious about helping, then I’ll teach you. Just keep any other comments not related to this to yourself.” Surprised by this sudden turn, all I could do was nod as she brought over the material meant for the rope. Wiping her hands on a rag, she began to show me how to braid the material properly. Although she refused to let me come near her, I managed to understand how to do it in little time. It was actually rather simple, however, I found that the rope we were making was thinner than expected. I’m not sure why this was, but she seemed to specifically want it this size. When she was done teaching me, and I tried to grab the rope from her, she pulled back in order to avoid me. Although she seemed to do it reflexively, this little action annoyed me greatly. Nevertheless, she handed it over and I began my task.

Despite our difficulties, she kept a close eye on me and stopped me whenever I made a mistake to help correct me. Once I’d gotten the hang of it, she went back to her previous task while occasionally looking back to check on my progress. Separately, we continued working in silence, both on the floor with our backs to the couch, but basically at opposite ends.

After a while, I grew a bit bored with how monotonous this task was. Looking out the window in an effort to entertain myself, I noticed that the sky was getting cloudy. If it happened to rain on the day that we escaped, would that help or hinder us?

“Looks like it’s going to rain.” I said as a rather throwaway line, mostly to fill the silence of the room.

“Is it? Rose hates thunder.”

“Really?” The fact that she had replied was quite surprising. Trying to keep her speaking, I asked a question. “Is it because of her sensitive hearing?”

She shrugged her shoulders. “All I know is that she hates it.”

The idea of Rosalia being frightened by thunder of all things made me smile. “I suppose she’s scared of a lot of things, isn’t she? It’s not as if I mind. I just find it a bit funny how childish she is at times.”

Senga stopped molding the clay and looked up at me. “You know she’s still a child... and so are you.”

“Hm?” The comment felt strange to hear, especially coming from her. “I thought we were around the same age.” Suddenly, Maia’s warnings came to mind. I gripped the fabric of my pants tightly in the anticipation of her verbal assault. Surprisingly, however, she didn’t seem angry.

“They said I was around fifteen years old. Physically, we’re not that far apart in age. Mentally though, you’re about as much of a kid as Rosalia. The more I spend time with you, the more I feel this way. You should be glad though because this is the only reason I’m speaking to you.”

“Because you think I’m a child?”

“Because I think you’re an idiot—” She suddenly stopped herself and shook her head. “Sorry... What I mean is that you remind me of how a kid doesn’t know anything. It’s hard for me to tell if I

should be careful around you or pity you. I'm starting to lean towards the second one since even Rose managed to trick you into doing something stupid.

"Well, that was—Will nothing I say change that opinion?"

"The more you say, the more I'm sure."

"Oh." It was all I could say as I tried to put together my thoughts on what she'd just admitted to me. Although I was no longer subhuman in her eyes, she now viewed me as an idiot to be pitied. Was that really much better?

As if suddenly remembering something, she quickly grabbed a rag and scrambled towards the fireplace. Reaching her hand in, she pulled out the sheet of metal she had placed the pottery on earlier and rested it on the stone flooring nearby. Although the house was mostly made of wood, the area near the fireplace was carved of stone, likely to prevent fires. I'm not exactly sure if this area was also meant for putting down hot objects, but it definitely served useful for that exact task on this day.

Not having experience in pottery, I had no clue if these were made well or not, but they certainly looked fine on the surface. After baking, the clay darkened and went from a light brown to a darker shade, almost as if the thing were made out of tree bark. Picking one of them up with a rag, Senga seemed rather displeased with her own work.

"Hmm, the uneven heat made parts of it get burnt. Argh, and this one is cracked, totally useless now. These others are... fine, I guess." Looking over the entire batch, she let out a sigh. "Maybe, I should just be glad this whole thing wasn't a waste of time. The next batch will hopefully come out better." She seemed to be muttering more to herself than me, but it was loud enough that I could clearly hear it.

"You're making more? Why do we need so many clay pots?"

"It's none of your business." She replied, not harshly, but rather as a plain statement. "Since you're already bothering me, let me see what you have so far." Coming over towards me, she grabbed the rope out of my hands and carefully examined it. Nodding, she gave it back. "It's not bad. Keep working on it until you're finished with all the material I gave you."

By the amount left, I could tell this would take hours to complete. As boring as this was, I suppose it was slightly better than doing nothing at all. Although our interactions were kept to a bare minimum, I could at least feel the hostility she held for me before lessening to some extent. She didn't approach me as hesitantly, and despite our interactions remaining professional, she didn't disparage me with unwarranted remarks. As far as I could tell, she was keeping true to her end of our agreement.

The only time she wore on my nerves was when she would spot a mistake I made and disassemble the braid up until the point of fault, no matter how far back it had to be. I would have said something had I not seen her do the same with her own work. She hadn't made a good impression on me today, but even I had to admire how hard of a worker she was. Perhaps it was only out of

self-preservation. Whatever the case, I simply sighed and let my annoyance fade every time she would undo my progress.

We'd gotten into a productive rhythm when a noise outside suddenly made us stop. It sounded as though a cart was coming up the path. We tried to resume our work until it sounded as though it were coming towards the house. Carefully, Senga went to look through the window before suddenly calling out to me.

"The big one's coming back."

I'm not sure if she knew his name or just didn't care enough to remember it. Either way, it wasn't long before the Toma suddenly came bursting through the door with a barrel in his arms. Before Senga could stop him, he squashed her new batch of pots that hadn't been baked yet underneath his feet. In his rush he seemed to not notice, dirtying the floor all along his path. Senga cursed him beneath her breath and quickly moved to get the surviving pots out of his path.

"Men never pay attention to the things around them." Senga grumbled aloud despite me and the Toma being within earshot. "If I could have been alone, this would have been done faster."

"It'll be fine." I said in a softer tone than usual, whether this was out of fear of her lashing out or trying to make her feel better I'm not sure. "If you show me how, I can help you make more of them."

"I can do it on my own!" She seemed to realize her outburst towards me was unwarranted and lowered her tone before continuing. "I work better on my own... Just keep working on the rope like you were doing before."

By now, I knew better than to say anything else. Although I tried my best to ignore the two, I found it strange how easy it was to anger Senga. Somehow she seemed more prone to these outbursts than Maia. Now that I thought about it, didn't she behave differently with Maia as well? Noticing that Reko had transported several barrels by now, I got curious and asked what this was about.

"I am not knowing myself." He replied in his usual broken speech. Walking past and into Maia's room, he still spoke loud enough for me to hear. "Maia put them aside so that I take. There is marking of some kind, but I do not know how to read. Whatever it is, I am not really caring because this is not part of my—Oh, I just remember! I will be delivering barrels of oil next, big ones."

"I'm assuming you don't know what those are for either."

"Yes. I carry here and that is task for today."

"Well, thank you for answering my question anyway."

He nodded and continued his task while I wondered what exactly we would do with so much oil. I've only seen oil used for lamps and I'm fairly sure they use some manner of oil to maintain the weapons as well.

What about oil in food?

Is it the same kind?

Is the oil for lamps edible?

Despite trying to ignore my own inane thoughts, I couldn't really find a good reason for us to hoard so many random items. It's not as if we were somehow going to disguise ourselves as traders. With the other barrels coming, there would be so much here that I doubt even a horse drawn carriage could carry it all. Also, such a plan seems far too simple and doesn't align with how Maia seems to operate. I feel like whatever we're going to do is much more elaborate.

Once Reko finished and left, Senga began to work on re-shaping a new batch. Although a few survived, she had been set back at least an hour as she was making them in large batches. As she worked, I would occasionally hear her hum for a few seconds as if a melody in her head were escaping without her noticing. It was strangely comforting to hear this and I remained silent about it in hopes that she would continue.

As she popped her creations into the fireplace, her soft humming became more audible. She seemed to get caught up in her own little world when she was concentrated like this. Although there were a few hymns we were taught, we weren't exactly allowed to freely sing despite it praising the Gods. Her carefree humming was a rather nice change to what I was used to.

Working on the rope and listening to her hum in the background made the time go by much faster than I noticed. By the time I had begun growing sleepy again, I realized that I'd used up almost all of the material I'd been given. Senga seemed to have stopped checking on me a while ago. In a way, I almost dreaded showing her my work thus far. She wouldn't be cruel enough to destroy so much of my work, would she?

She probably would be.

Just as I was building up the courage to show her the end product, a pair of familiar voices caught our attention. Muffled as they were, they were still easily recognizable. The two of them were back earlier than expected. It'd be nice to hear what Rosalia was up to before going to sleep, since I was curious as to where Maia was taking them.

Opening the door, Rosalia saw us and immediately rushed over, throwing her hood on the couch. At first I thought Senga was being rather sweet by stretching her arms out to embrace Rosalia, however, it soon became apparent that's not what she was trying to do.

"Rose, stop! You'll—"

Before she could finish speaking, Rosalia had already stepped on one of the wet clay balls. Immediately, she slid and crashed into a set of the few finished pots that still remained. I held my breath, expecting the worst, however, Senga seemed more concerned for Rosalia's safety as the small pots had shattered.

"Are you alright?" She asked while hurrying to Rosalia's side.

"Uh, yeah, it's more embarrassing than anything... Sorry, I was just happy to see you two." She looked away in embarrassment and immediately saw what she had broken. Profusely apologizing, she

begged for Senga's forgiveness. Unlike her behavior earlier, she kept her emotions in check and simply chastised Rosalia for being reckless. When I saw them like this, I suppose they really were like sisters. Having to deal with Rosalia's antics on a daily basis, maybe it makes some sense as to why Senga is the way she is.

By now, I noticed that Maia had been standing in the doorway for some time with her hood in her hand, looking at the scene before her. The way she simply stood there silently made the hair on my arms stand up. It felt like we'd dodged a painful strike just to move into the path of a deadly one. The moment she turned her attention to me, I felt as though my heart skipped a beat.

"What the hell is this mess?" Her voice was calm and that only made it worse. Rosalia's little slip and fall only made the earlier mess left by Reko even worse. Trying to calm her, I assured her that it would be cleaned soon, however, this didn't seem to work. Closing the door gently behind her, she walked over and stood over the three of us. "Even though we're going to be leaving this place, I don't want to be living in a pigsty in the meantime, you understand me?"

Senga decided to choose the worst time possible to speak up. "That man came in here and crushed all of my wet clay while he was stomping around. It's not our fault that he doesn't watch where he's going."

Maia's eyebrow twitched for a fraction of a second. Kneeling down, she got close to Senga. "I frankly don't care. I want you and your sister to clean this mess up before I really get angry." Sensing the mistake she'd made, Senga obediently nodded and dragged Rosalia off with her. As they went to fill some buckets in the river, Maia came over towards me. "Gods... All I wanted to do was come back home and get some rest. Didn't I tell you to get as much sleep as you could? Why are you on the floor?" Letting out a frustrated sigh she stopped me before I could respond. "You know what? Forget it. I don't care what sort of excuses you have." Suddenly grabbing one of my fingers, she bent it back to the point where I thought she would break it.

"Maia, stop!"

"If you keep screwing around, I'm going to break it as punishment. Do you understand?" I quickly nodded and she let go in response. "I already told you what would happen if you're not ready by the time we have to leave." Grabbing my face, she forced me to look straight at her. "Don't be an idiot. Go to sleep. Get some rest."

"I-I will."

After helping me onto the couch, she informed me that she'd be returning in a few hours and left back out the door. Holding my finger close to my chest, I massaged it to help rid myself of the pain she inflicted. I realize I'm being irresponsible by not focusing on my recovery, but she went too far... Why is Rosalia the only one that's ever kind to me?

Laying down, I covered myself with the blanket and closed my eyes. It was strange that I was having trouble falling asleep now when earlier I felt incredibly drowsy while making that rope.

Will I actually be ready by the time we have to leave?

How long will it take until I'm healthy?

What if we have to leave tomorrow?

I tried to clear my mind of these thoughts but they simply continued to harass me.

Will those girls really be safe?

Is it really possible for all of us to make it?

Growing frustrated with my own mind, I grumbled to myself and looked out the nearby window. It was late afternoon. From the look of things, there were still a few more hours in the day. All in all, nothing much actually happened today. We're still in the process of arranging things for Maia's plan, whatever it is. If it weren't for the way Senga and Maia treated me today, I'd likely be in a better mood. I suppose Reko is fairly polite to me, but the only person I can really consider friendly in any way is Rosalia... The same person that left me for dead not too long ago. Even if Maia takes care of me, sometimes I wonder if I'm just a useful tool for the future... It's hard to tell at times.

Bursting through the door, Rosalia and Senga carried their buckets of water, struggling with the shifting weight as they walked with it in their hands. Splashing a bit on the floor, Rosalia decided to stop in front of me. "Whoops, guess I already started here so I'll go ahead and start cleaning."

Although Senga seemed to want to argue, it didn't appear as though they knew Maia had already left. Instead Senga closed the door and obediently went over towards the hallway where more of the clay had been tracked throughout. With a rag in her hand, Rosalia sneakily came closer to me.

"Psst, Captain, you asleep yet? You can whisper to me if you aren't."

"I'm awake." I whispered back.

"How'd it go? You guys have fun?"

"It was... Fine, I suppose."

"She wasn't mean to you, was she?" Keeping up her facade, she began to scrub the floor, cleaning up some of the clay. "Don't worry, I won't tell her you told me."

Debating on whether or not to tell her the truth, I decided to keep my promise to Senga. "She wasn't particularly mean to me, just a bit distant. At the very least, she taught me how to make rope, although it's strangely thin, isn't it?"

"Oh, you're the one who did that?" She said, holding up the thin rope with a look of surprise. "You did a good job! It's not really a rope but... well, you'll see."

"What do you mean?"

"It'll be a lot more fun if it's a surprise."

"Rose, do you need help? I'm done with this part." Senga yelled as she got up and began walking over.

“Shoot, we’ll talk later. Get better soon, okay?” Quickly, she began to scrub furiously, making up for the time she lost speaking to me. When Senga finally came over she looked over towards me and then back to Rosalia.

“Is he awake?” She asked, unable to tell because of my hood.

“He’s asleep.” Realizing Senga might have heard her whispering to me, she quickly came up with an excuse. “I was just singing a little to pass the time, y’know?”

“Which one?”

“The bird song.”

Giggling, Senga began to scrub next to Rosalia. The two of them spent quite a while trying to get all the clay from off the wood flooring. After coming back from refilling their buckets, I heard Senga begin humming before soon breaking out into song, quiet enough to not wake the supposedly sleeping person on the couch.

*Three little birds, high up above
Feathers like snow, white as doves
Late for the winter, or early for spring?
Little do they care what nature brings*

*High, oh, High they fly one day
Making a circle in the sky they play
Way down low the crops they dry
But the three little birds they never cry*

*For if those birds ever want for food
They fly down to the baker man
Hopping, hopping, chirping, tweeting
Breadcrumb meal for all this evening*

Senga’s voice was so sweet and gentle that it was hard to believe it came from the same person who spoke so harshly to me earlier. Rosalia joined into her song, adding her own made up lyrics that didn’t flow quite as well.

*Three little birds they scrub the floor
Rags so dirty, man it’s a bore
They wish they could play outside all day
But they gotta work hard or else they’ll pay*

While Rosalia's voice wasn't as nice as Senga's, it was comforting to hear her sing nonetheless as the two of them seemed genuinely happy. I noticed that as they continued to work, they sang less and less until they simply hummed. I suppose coming up with rhyme schemes was hard to do on the spot. Finishing up the area in front of me, they moved onto other parts of the house. Although I couldn't see them or hear their voices clearly, the same melodic humming and occasional conversation made a soothing backdrop that eventually began lulling me to sleep.

I closed my eyes for what only felt like a moment and yet when I opened them once more I saw moonlight coming in through the windows. Had it not been for this and the change in how my body felt, I would have thought only an hour passed at most. The constant dull pain I felt seemed to be mostly gone now, but this good news aside, I now had an issue I'd never come across before. I was wide awake while everyone else was asleep. The house was entirely silent.

What do I do now? I can't leave this place and I'm not tired enough to fall back asleep. Should I just stay awake a bit and hope drowsiness finds me again?

Although I'm all alone, my thoughts don't seem to be running frantically. If anything, I feel strangely at peace. Despite being alone, I didn't exactly feel *lonely* at this moment. Perhaps knowing they were sleeping in the other room made all the difference. Feeling my throat a bit dry, I realized this made a good excuse to get up and stretch my legs a bit. Perhaps I'd think of something to do on the way there.

Walking past the kitchen table I began to think about the future. What would it be like to eat as a group? Or to converse with so many at the same time? Would we be able to get along or would we simply be travelling together for mutual protection and needs? Today didn't go too well with Senga, but I suppose it could have gone much worse. I wish I could get along with the others as easily as I do Rosalia.

Reaching the kitchen, I found the large jug that always held water and poured myself some. Drinking deeply from the cup, I stopped to let out a satisfied sigh before carefully stretching to not pop open my stitched wounds. Just as I was doing this, I suddenly heard one of the floorboards groan.

Everyone should be asleep.

Did someone get up to relieve themselves?

It was the most likely explanation, but there also existed the small possibility that an intruder was lurking inside the house. This seemed very unlikely, as there was little chance they'd get in without alerting someone, but then again there were a lot of skilled people in the Academy. To completely dismiss such a possibility would only invite my own death.

Holding my breath, I could hear quiet footsteps making their way towards me. As much as I hate to appear like a paranoid person, if this is indeed an outsider I'll only have one chance to attack before I'm overpowered. Grabbing the knife we'd been using for food, I waited while taking slow

breaths. I can't blindly attack as it's likely one of our own. Perhaps jumping out will surprise them and give me enough time to identify if it's an intruder or not. Then again, doesn't this make *me* appear like an intruder in their eyes? Thinking about it, Maia might actually kill me if she thinks she's in any danger... She might even beat me, despite recognizing me, for simply scaring her.

The kitchen was in a semi-open room of sorts. You would be able to see into it from the table area, but from the couch, and certain angles, it was hidden. With the person coming closer, I had no choice but to decide on an action. In the end, I squeezed myself between a large cabinet and the counter that held food and other items. I'd be able to jump out the moment they walked into the kitchen. I just prayed it was Rosalia or her sister.

As they were about a foot away, I realized how light their footsteps were. It had to be a Sora, or Rosalia. Whatever it was, I held my breath until I could almost feel them turning the corner. Gripping the knife tightly in my hand, I suddenly lunged out of my hiding spot. Ignoring the pain this movement caused me, I grabbed the mysterious person by their collar while my other hand was raised in the air, ready to be brought down.

Weeks ago, I would have never hesitated to stab at a pair of glowing eyes in the dark. Now, however, I nearly fell on top of this little fool after aborting my assault and losing my balance. We wrestled in the dark as I tried to keep myself from falling and she tried to get my hand off of her. Finally regaining my balance, I turned around and managed to see that she was so frightened she couldn't get the scream out. Tossing the knife to the side, I covered her mouth to prevent her from waking the others.

"Wait! Rosalia, it's me. Why are you sneaking around like this?"

"I-It was just a joke!" She frantically whispered back.

Realizing that she had actually been trying to scare me herself, I tried shifting the blame to avoid any bad impression this may have given her. "You shouldn't do that to someone like me. I'm still trained as a Cog at the end of the day. If I didn't hold back, I could have killed you."

"I thought it would be funny if I spooked you..."

"It... I know you didn't mean any harm, but I'm still a bit on edge after what happened at the storage shed. The Academy could catch onto us at any time."

"Yeah, I guess so. Sorry about that..." Her ears were lying flat as she looked away from me.

"It's alright... I've realized more or less that being a troublemaker is just one of your faults. I can't blame you—Well, I can, but I'm doing my best to learn how to deal with you all."

"I don't get it... but thanks, I think?"

"You don't have to thank me. After all, you've never put me down for my own issues. Granted, what happened due to yours is far worse, but at the same time it was never intentional. I'm starting to better understand that now. You can't help the way you are anymore than I can."

"What exactly do you think my issues are?"

“That you’re overly curious, a troublemaker, and cowardly.”

Startled by my description of her, she raised her voice slightly. “Geez, you could be nicer when saying that! You’re almost starting to sound like Senga...”

“Well, it’s because you likely caused trouble for her as well. We both care about you so it’s no surprise we’d get dragged into—”

“You do?”

Realizing what I’d said I felt a crushing embarrassment as I tried to re-word my previous admission. “It’s... Umm... Perhaps not the same, but you are my friend after all so it’s only natural for me to care about your well being and—”

“I knew it! You really do see me as a friend again!” Refusing to let me get another word in, she suddenly stepped forward, grabbing my hand while eagerly saying, “Can we go somewhere?”

“Huh?” I was surprised by the sudden action. Regaining my composure, I tried explaining my situation to her. “I don’t think it’s safe for us to leave this place. If anything happens, I can’t run and... I don’t need to explain what will happen to me.”

“You don’t have to... I meant, into the backyard, dummy. I know you’re hurt. We won’t have to talk so quietly if we’re outside.”

After so much time indoors, it was a very tempting offer. Seeing nothing too dangerous about this, I gave into her wants and allowed her to lead me through the darkness and out the door. All along the way, she didn’t let go of me as though she were afraid I’d fall down without her guidance. It was a kind gesture, but it also made me feel like a frail old man being guided along by an energetic child.

I had some initial hesitation as I stepped out of the house, but all it took was seeing the wide open sky for me to feel much more at ease. Although many clouds had begun to cover the sky, there were still large patches that allowed you to see the twinkling stars. So rarely did I ever get to see the night sky like this due to our curfew. It was beautiful and almost made me forget the situation we were in. Bringing me back to reality, Rosalia gently tugged at my arm as I had stopped moving. Resuming, she led me towards the shadow of a nearby tree, which seemed a fairly smart idea as it protected us from Sora patrols that may pass by. After helping lower me to the ground, Rosalia sat nearby on the grass.

“So Captain, what did you wanna talk about?”

“Me? I thought you’d brought me out here to say something.”

“Heh, I uh... Sorta just wanted to hang out with you. I guess we don’t really have to talk about anything. It’s just nice to hang out sometimes.”

“I suppose that’s true.”

She stretched and laid down on the grass. Since we were both staring up anyway, I did the same. There was a nice breeze that, although it was a bit chilly out, didn’t feel too bad. Watching the clouds slowly drift through the sky, they would reveal new stars for a few minutes before they were covered

back up again. I was rather pleased just relaxing like this, but it seemed Rosalia couldn't stand the silence. Speaking up again, she had a request.

"By the way, I wanted to ask more about how it went earlier, but you fell asleep. You mind telling me now?"

"Ah... Well..." Starting from when I awoke, I began telling Rosalia about my day with Senga, leaving out some of the aspects that would likely cause trouble. When I was done recounting what had happened, I glanced over and saw that she was smiling.

"I know you're lying, Captain." Surprised by this accurate accusation, I tried to defend myself but she continued anyway. "To tell you the truth, I already squeezed what happened out of her. I knew she wasn't going to be nice to you and you're not that good at lying either. It's nice that you tried covering for her, but you shouldn't let her treat you like that. As her sister, I guess you're gonna have to take my apology instead of hers. Even though she promised not to fight with you, as long as you behave, I don't think she'll ease up anytime soon. If she had it her way, we wouldn't even be talking right now... I know I keep saying it, but I promise you'll eventually see how sweet of a person she is. She just has some issues I don't really understand."

"Maybe it's something in her past? All of us have pasts we either don't remember or don't want to speak of. If the day comes that I regain my memories, who knows what I'll be like? I could end up worse than Senga."

"Geez, don't be mean to her. Even if she's not here, you shouldn't pick on her!"

"It was just my attempt at a joke. To be honest, I don't completely dislike Senga." Remembering the way she sang merrily with Rosalia, my feelings towards her softened a bit. "I can see a glimmer of her charming side underneath that cold facade."

"Her *what*?"

"Her *facade*, the way she makes herself appear despite her true self being different. I heard the two of you singing quite happily, you know. You seemed to enjoy—"

Folding her ears downward and putting her hands over them, she pretended to not hear. "I'm not listening any more! You were supposed to be sleeping, not spying on us!" Suddenly realizing something, she turned to me and exasperatedly asked, "Wait, you didn't hear anything else, did you?"

"Oh? Like what?"

"Nevermind, I'm not telling you!"

Her reaction finally managed to make me laugh. Despite how much it hurt, I found it difficult to stop.

It feels so familiar... and yet it's the first time I can recall ever doing this.

She seemed to be surprised by my sudden laughter as well and couldn't help but stare for a moment. Feeling self-conscious, my laughter began to die as I tried to get myself under control, however, she encouraged me to continue by joining in. Although I initially found it strange, I couldn't

help but feel her infectious joy spread to me. Laughing alongside her, I shared this newfound feeling with my friend. Perhaps we seemed like idiots, being far too jovial over something that wasn't really that funny to begin with. Nevertheless, we were happy.

When our laughter finally faded, I realized that she had moved closer to me. With her head near to my shoulder, she seemed strangely content. "I like the way you laugh."

"T-Thank you." I responded, confused by both her sudden action and compliment. Feeling as though I were obligated to say something kind in return, I admitted something to her. "I always enjoy the time we spend together."

I began to feel my heart pound as I said that. Saying such things was still not something I was used to at all. She said similar things so freely and yet I had to practically drag it out of my spirit.

Does that mean they aren't as meaningful to her?

I couldn't even entertain the idea because suddenly Rosalia called my attention to something in the sky. "Oh look, a shooting star!" High above, one of the stars seemed to streak across the sky before disappearing behind the clouds. It filled me with awe as I never knew such a thing could happen. Not knowing where it went, however, filled me with some anxiety.

"Where did it go? Is this something we should be concerned about?" I asked, slowly trying to sit up.

"No, dummy, relax and lay back down." Taking her word for it, I did as she said. "To tell you the truth, I don't know what it really is either. It might not even be a star. Whatever it is, when you see one of them shooting across the sky you make a wish. You wanna make one?"

"Together or..."

"You do it in your head. I'm pretty sure anyone who sees it gets one. Not like it matters since it's just make-believe, but—What I mean is, it's fun to do, so let's do it!"

I wanted to ask her more, but I could see that she was already focused on whatever it was she was asking for. Seeing her eyes closed, deep in thought, I followed suit. I suppose in some way it was no different than a prayer, but who exactly was I asking this wish to? More than that, what did I even want to wish for? Some time passed and I still couldn't decide.

"Did ya make your wish?" She asked while poking my shoulder.

"Ah, yes, I did." In the heat of the moment, I seemingly lied for no reason.

"You're not supposed to say what you wished for or it doesn't come true, but I'll at least say that I wished for something that'll help you."

"Help me?"

"You sorta seem a little stressed lately, so I was thinking that maybe I could help with that somehow. Since you've watched my back ever since I met you, it's only right that I worry about you too."

Although I wasn't sure if there was a time limit on these wishes, I suddenly felt a bit guilty for not wishing for Rosalia's safety. Amending this, I muttered a prayer-like wish underneath my breath to this shooting star. A moment of silence passed as we laid there in silence, simply taking in the sight of the night sky. Unlike before, I was the one to break the silence this time. There was a question that had been lingering in my mind that suddenly became impossible to dismiss. "I'm curious about something... Why exactly are you up so late at night?"

"Huh?" She looked at me with a bit of suspicion. "What made you ask that all of the sudden?"

"Nothing in particular, I just found it strange that you were awake at the same time as me. Were you having trouble sleeping?"

"Not really... I had a nightmare so I was kinda scared to go back to sleep so fast. Sometimes when I do, I just end up having the same nightmare again. Since I heard you moving around in the other room, I thought it'd be fun to see what you were up to."

"And try to scare me."

"That too!"

She made herself chuckle and even forced me to crack a smile with her lightheartedness. Once she settled down, I turned around to ask her something but was caught off-guard when I found her already staring at me.

"Rosalia?"

"Y'know, I kinda missed you today... and I'm gonna miss you a whole lot more in the coming week." With her ears drooped, I knew there was more to this than she was letting on.

"Is something happening?"

I suppose this was the real reason she had brought me out here. Maybe she didn't want to sour the night by bringing up such a topic earlier, but now I really wanted to know.

"It's sorta hard to explain because I can't tell you too much. There's this *special* thing that I know how to do, and if it weren't an emergency, I would have never told her about it, but since I needed materials that only she'd have access to—"

"Such vagueness is only going to confuse me, Rosalia. I know it's out of your control, but... Well, I dislike having so much kept from me and if you tell me only part of the story, my mind will be restless. Maybe it'd be best to just tell me the gist of what's happening."

"*Gist?*"

"The summary... As in the most important parts in a short manner. At least in a way that makes sense and doesn't get you in trouble with Maia should I accidentally let something slip out."

"Gotcha." Taking a moment to think, she seemed to have found a way to rephrase her explanation. "I'm gonna need to work on something secret and until I'm done, I won't be able to hang out with you. I know it's a drag, but Maia wants as few people to know about it as possible. I swear I'll tell you all about it eventually, but you know how she is."

“I sometimes wish I didn’t, but I understand the position you’re in. That being said, be careful about what you involve yourself in. It’s both reassuring and worrying that Maia thinks so highly of whatever you suggested to her, even to the point of having that Toma bring so many materials in. Out of curiosity, are they all meant for you?”

Putting her finger to her lips, she shushed me. “Even if you figure it out, pretend like you don’t know. Maia will probably skin us both alive if she thinks I told you anything. Like I said earlier, it’ll be a nice surprise once you see all of it anyway.” Giving a big stretch, she let her hand fall on my shoulder, but didn’t remove it. “Once this is all over, I hope we go to a place where we can have some fun. I’m tired of all this hiding and sneaking around. I just wanna go somewhere where all three of us can be happy.”

I couldn’t help but smile at knowing that she included me in her imaginings of a better future. Even so, I felt the need to remind her of our present reality.

“As nice as that sounds, things are likely to be tough for a while. Even after escaping from here, we’re still going to have to deal with that swamp...”

She lightly slapped my shoulder in response. “Geez, you’re so negative. You’re ruining my happy daydream—*night*dream?”

“Sorry... I suppose you’re not wrong. If my time here has taught me anything, it’s that things never stay terrible forever. Eventually, something improves. You just have to live long enough to see it happen.”

“I guess that’s one way to look at it... and I guess it’s true too. You sound a lot happier than when I first met you.” Getting even closer than before, her face was practically buried in the fabric of my arm. Before I could ask what she was doing, she explained herself. “Heh, it’s getting kinda cold, so I hope you don’t mind.” Despite her voice being muffled, I could tell there was a hint of nervousness to it.

“It’s fine, but we can go back inside if you’re cold.”

“Don’t worry about it!” She reassured me as she popped her head back up. “I wanted to stay out a little longer. It’s sorta relaxing, isn’t it?”

“If you’re fine, then I don’t mind...”

As I took a few breaths to relax myself, I turned my gaze upward as she nestled back to where she had previously been. Nights like this really are beautiful. The sky is completely different than during the daytime. I could stare at the moon without its light hurting my eyes. Even with only half of it there, it was such a wondrous thing to see. So bright and white with darker spots randomly throughout. Why had the Gods made the night so beautiful and yet made us sleep through most of it?

The sounds were different as well. Gone were most of the sounds I was used to and instead there were only the sounds of small creatures calling to one another and the occasional insect noise as well. Aside from the occasional wind rustling leaves, there was nothing more except silence. As a leaf

fell from the tree above us and landed on my head, I was reminded of the approaching winter. What a terrible time we chose to do such a crazy thing.

Even though the wind was chillier than it had been earlier, I wouldn't say that I was cold. In fact, I was starting to understand why the Academy taught us to huddle together for warmth in cold environments. Having Rosalia snuggled against my arm like this is actually rather comfortable. As the clouds moved, I saw the bright blue star that we were taught always pointed north. Curious to see if Rosalia knew about this, I turned to her, but soon I found that she appeared to be sleeping. With her face pressed tightly against my arm, she evoked the same feeling within me as when I saw a baby animal. I suppose she'd be angry with me if she knew such a thing came to mind, but she really did have similar endearing traits.

I suppose after helping Maia all day, she must have been quite tired. I'll leave her in peace for a while longer. Hopefully her dreams are much better this time around.

Enjoying the quiet, I stared up at the sky for a while longer before suddenly catching myself nodding off. As relaxing as all of this is, we shouldn't fall asleep out here in the cold. I'm sure Rosalia will catch a cold as well if I let her stay out here longer. As I tried to get up, she unexpectedly grabbed a tight hold of me. Although I didn't want to, I needed to wake her and get us both inside. I assumed shaking my arm would be enough to wake her, but to my surprise she was in a rather deep sleep. Is there a better way to go about this?

I'd feel bad for disturbing her when she looks so peaceful.

Knowing the pain that was about to come from doing this, I held my breath and prepared myself. Slipping my arm from her grasp, I placed my hands beneath her body in an effort to lift her, but became distracted by the discovery of how petite she truly was. Even though this uniform fit her better, it still had managed to hide the smallness of her form. As odd as this was, it made the action of carrying her easier as she was rather light. If it weren't for her ears and tail, you might be able to mistake her for a Sora. As I stood there, with her lying in my arms, I felt a strange sense of happiness in seeing how calm she was in my presence. She seemed to trust me enough to fall asleep and assume I'd take care of her... Either that or she was just reckless. It was hard to tell as she had a silly smile plastered on her face as she slept.

Making my way back to the house was still a struggle due to my injuries, but it wasn't until I saw the door that I realized things were going to get really difficult. Trying to shift her weight to one arm was more painful than I could handle, so instead I leaned against the wall for support until I could finally manage to open it. Finally able to get back inside, I made my way over to the couch and laid her down. After going back to close the open door, I was surprised to turn around and see that she was already awake, rubbing her eyes and giving a satisfied stretch. Fighting back a yawn she apologized, "Sorry, did I fall asleep?"

“I tried to wake you, but you were sleeping so soundly that I decided to just carry you inside instead.”

“Oh, I guess you really did, huh?” She responded, looking around as if trying to get her bearings. “Heh, I should probably go back before someone notices I’m gone... Umm, thanks for tonight, Captain. I’ll try and get it done as fast as I can, okay?”

“I’d rather you do it as *well* as you can, instead of focusing on speed, but either way, goodnight.”

“G’night!” The girl did a random awkward bow before running off into the darkness. I thought that would be it, however, a moment later I saw her eyes peering back at me. It was as if she wanted to say something else. Looking back, I waited, but as seconds of silence passed, it sort of devolved into a weird standoff. As if suddenly remembering that I could see her glowing eyes, she looked away and hastily slid herself into the room after cracking the door open.

I wasn’t really sure what to make of her strange antics. If I think about it too much, I’m liable to stay awake the whole night. I should just be happy we had a nice time together. I suppose I’ll have to find some way to entertain myself for the coming week. Normally, I would appreciate this chance to rest peacefully but... Well, I suppose despite her faults, I’ve grown rather fond of having her around.

Chapter XI

Yearning

For several days now, all I've done is sleep and eat. In my past life I would have thought this to be a heaven-like existence. So often I prayed to be able to lay on a nice and soft bed with a belly full of food. Now that I had it, I'm beginning to realize that this wasn't exactly how I pictured it to be. Physically, I'm feeling better and better every day. My aching body has turned into mere soreness and I can move normally without much issue now. To my amazement, Maia was able to remove the stitches last night as my wounds were fully closed. I cannot overstate how miraculous her healing is. There's an abundance of gratitude within me to Maia and the Gods, however, I can't help but have my mind focus on a major problem I've been facing for a while now... That being that I'm utterly bored.

I've been alone most of my existence, but the difference is that I always had something to do. Now, my days consist entirely of an endless cycle of eating and going to sleep, over and over. It's gotten to the point where I've lost track of the days. I'm only vaguely aware of how much time has truly passed due to Maia's healing sessions. So far, those have been the only things keeping me sane along with the times that Rosalia comes out of Maia's room for food or other reasons. Even then, I'm often asleep and end up missing her, or she's simply too busy to have much of a conversation. I've been hearing strange noises coming from that room and somewhere else in the house as well, almost as if there were something below us. Loud bangs, pops, and the smell of something burning sometimes wakes me. When it's not that, it's Reko delivering more and more barrels. Just how many can even fit in this house? With how many they've brought in, I suspect there's a room I haven't seen yet. Whatever Rosalia is up to, she's remained tight-lipped as promised.

I realize that it's only been about a week, but to me it's felt like an eternity. Even now, I've simply been staring out a window for hours. Normally, I'd drift off to sleep by now, but there comes a point where your body simply refuses no matter how long you lay down. I've somehow managed to become fatigued from sleeping itself. With the sun beginning to set, I'm shuddering to imagine what Maia will do to me once she finds me awake.

Will she actually break my finger this time?

Gods, I hope I can make her understand my plight. Suppose I pretend to sleep, would she fall for it? Would it only make things worse if she sees through my ruse? Actually, maybe I should just be honest with her. Recently, despite how tired she seems coming back from her daily tasks, she still makes time to heal me. Granted, she does take out some of her frustration on me by pulling my ear, pinching, or shoving her knuckle deep into random points that are surprisingly painful... It sounds bad now that I think about it, but if she genuinely hated me she wouldn't exhaust herself healing me. I suppose I'm also partly to blame for continuously prying into things she tries to keep hidden from me, such as what Rosalia is involved in.

Although the Academy took care of me, it was only on the basis that I was useful to them. I can't discount the fact that it could be the same with Maia, but something feels different. Maybe, I'm just easy to fool? It's frustrating to never know who I can trust. There are so many things that are on my mind right now, but I'm confined to this couch for most of the day.

Hearing someone coming up the pathway, I could only assume it was Maia. By now, I've almost been able to identify each person by their footsteps. Reko's are the easiest because of how heavy they are, Maia's are even steps as if she's actively ensuring they're always uniform, Senga's are uneven and lighter than Maia's while Rosalia's are the lightest of all with noticeably quicker steps than the others. Knowing that both Senga and Rosalia were in Maia's room, I was almost entirely sure as to who it was. Upon opening the door and entering, I was proven right. She took one look at me and shook her head. Instead of an angry outburst, however, she asked a simple question.

"What are you doing awake?"

"I couldn't sleep. I've slept so much that I can't even force it anymore."

"I could always choke you until you pass out if it bothers you so much." Her tone was rather deadpan. The issue with her, is that the chances of this being a bad joke or a threat were equally possible.

"Ah... T-That's not necessary at all." Trying to plead to her, I joined my hands and bowed my head. "I was hoping to speak to you if possible."

"About what?" She seemed a bit surprised by my sudden request. "You always want to talk every time I heal you. I'm not really in the mood today."

"About..." I hadn't really thought of what to say. In the moment, I simply spoke without much thought. Trying to come up with a plausible reason for my request, I ended up saying, "I was curious about the progress of our escape plan."

She let out a frustrated sigh. "Seriously? Again?" Motioning with her finger she commanded, "Get on your feet." She hadn't demanded this of me before. I was genuinely worried I had angered her. Obeying her command, I did as she asked. Unlike before, it wasn't much of a struggle. There was only a slight soreness in my ribs and back. Reaching down, she grabbed my boots and tossed them over on the floor next to me. "Put these on and don't sit back down when you do it." Once again I was hit with another strange command. Slowly bending over to pick up the boots, I was surprised to see my range of motion had returned. Aside from the aching getting a bit worse, I was able to easily grab the boots, kneel down, and put them on. Once I did as she asked, and rose back up, she nodded in approval. "Wait for me outside."

Hesitating for a moment, unsure if she really meant for me to leave the house, she saw my lack of movement and motioned towards the door. As I obediently stepped out, I turned back to see if she'd follow, but instead, the door was shut right in my face.

Is this another one of her bad jokes?

Trying to open the door, I realized it was locked. She's being awfully mean for a joke. Even if it's a very low chance, I could be spotted out here.

Any moment now, she'll open the door and tease me for being worried.

As I stood waiting for her, watching the sun go down and feeling the air growing colder, a thought suddenly entered my mind.

Is she going to leave me out all night?

Right as I was about to knock on the door, she suddenly opened the door. Standing there awkwardly, I quickly moved out of the way so she could step out. Even with her hood on, I could feel her judgemental stare.

"What's up with you? You're acting strange."

"You uhh... Left me outside for a long time."

Tilting her head, almost like Rosalia, she responded in an almost mocking tone. "You realize you could have just come back in, right? I was busy talking to the girls about something I needed them to do."

"You locked the door..."

"Oh really?" Her acting was so convincing that I genuinely didn't know if this was a mistake or not. "I forgot that it does that sometimes. Anyways, I thought it'd be good for you to stretch your legs a bit today. Consider it a form of rehabilitation since you've been on your ass for so long."

"Are we going for a walk? Or..."

"Relax, you're acting like you're in trouble. Do you really think I'd do something bad to you when you're recovering?" Remaining silent, she took that as a response. "I do find it strange that you're healing so quickly though. Even with what I explained before, it's pretty abnormal... But, I won't complain and neither should you. Guess you really are a bit special. Anyways, since I'm tired and you're doing a lot better, I thought it'd be nice to celebrate a little."

"Celebrate?"

"Yeah, *ce-le-brate*." She dragged out the word to emphasize it. "You understand what that word means or do I need to explain it to you?"

"It's not that, I just—"

Raising her hand, I flinched expecting her to strike me. Instead, she lightly tapped the top of my head. "You dumbass... Why can't you just accept something at face value and be happy? I'm not all that mean. Just give me a sec and we'll get going. Oh, and don't worry, as long as you're with me nobody will bother questioning us."

"Even if they see the armband?"

"You can get away with anything if you're high enough in the hierarchy, so long as you don't screw with the operations too much or step on any important person's toes. If an Overseer spots you, stay quiet and I'll handle it." Moving past me, she produced a key and unlocked a small box that was

attached to the wall outside her door. Inside it held a pre-war lantern. It was made of metal and had bands that wrapped around the glass of its main body to help protect it. I'd never seen one this close. Despite its age, it was in great condition with only a bit of rust. "Bet you've never seen something like this before. Check it out."

At first I thought she was just showing off how nice her lantern looked, however, I soon saw that it was far more impressive than it initially appeared. Without the use of a firestarter, or any other method I was used to, she simply turned a knob on the side a few times, produced some sparks, and soon enough a small fire came to life inside of the glass cage. I was in complete awe of what I'd just seen, but she treated it as no big deal and began walking away from me. As I followed behind her, a movement in the sky caught my eye. From this distance, it looked like birds at first, but moments later it became clear that they were Soras who were patrolling the skies.

Once the sun sets for the night, they'd likely need to return in order to grab one of the more basic lanterns they hand out to guards. Unlike Maia's special one, those were just basic oil lamps enclosed in a metal sheet with holes for the light to poke out. They weren't as bright due to some of the light being blocked, but this was a trade-off necessary to protect the delicate glass that held the flame. Torches, which are usually carried by those on the ground, are much brighter, however, Soras can't use them while flying since the wind snuffs out the fire.

I only briefly got to practice with them during training as you have to be careful with them while flying so as to not tilt them too much. Best case scenario would be the flame being snuffed out or an abundance of smoke from overfeeding the fire. In the worst of cases, the oil inside would catch on fire as it was spilling out and become a great hazard. Although I was never chosen for guard duty, we were told many stories of such things happening and causing forest fires. Perhaps Maia's lamp had the same issue. Whatever the case, my attention was focused on the Soras for now.

As they flew over us, I lowered my head so as to not reflexively turn to look at them. Although I trusted Maia to keep us safe, it didn't prevent me from feeling some anxiety at seeing them so close. Perhaps the amount of light, or maybe even the unique shadow it cast, made the lantern a form of signal to the others as far as I could tell. From the sky, Maia's clothing wouldn't look very different from a regular Medic. The only thing that made sense to me was that the lantern was a symbol of authority that perhaps I hadn't learned of.

Whatever the true reason behind our safety, we were able to walk undisturbed past the guards whether they be on the ground or in the air, eventually even getting off the main path and transferring to a lesser used one. I felt as though I recognized this path, but my mind was so focused on trying to appear *normal* that I didn't pay too much attention to where we were going. By now, the sun had nearly disappeared and the darkness made it hard to identify anything that wasn't illuminated by the light of the lamp. In the distance, I saw a familiar silhouette, but my attention was suddenly drawn back to Maia who spoke for the first time since we began walking.

“You’re not having any trouble keeping up with me, are you? Be honest with me, kid.”

“No, it’s just some minor aches at worst. Nothing serious enough to slow me down.”

“Good. You might be awful at fighting, but at the very least you’re durable if nothing else.”

“I’m a decent fighter.” I responded back, sounding much more defensive than I had hoped to.

“Both times I was caught off-guard and had to fight without any arms. It’s hard to even call the second one a fight as I was ambushed. If I’d been armed things would’ve—”

“In a real fight, you’re not guaranteed anything. I get that you didn’t really have a chance either time, but try and take this as a lesson. Even with my healing, if you end up with wounds your body can’t naturally recover from, you’re as good as dead.”

“You mean you can’t save people from mortal wounds?”

“More or less... I had to open you up in order to keep your own ribs from collapsing your lungs. If I weren’t skilled in surgery, you would have been dead, even with my ability. Get hurt like that again, when we’re escaping or out there in the world, and there’s no guarantee I’ll have the time or resources to save you. It’s already a miracle you didn’t die this time.” Thrusting the lantern’s handle into my hands, she pointed down the path we were walking. “Enough talking, let’s get this over with. Go walk over that way as if nothing were happening. Walk about a hundred paces and then turn back around the moment you’re sure nobody is looking. I’ll find you once you return and we can head back together.”

Before I could even ask what she was going to do, she ran off into the forest and disappeared. I stood there stunned for a moment. Why can she never tell me things in advance? Is this another one of her bad jokes at my expense? Not being able to risk standing here, I forced myself to start walking despite my head being filled with questions.

What part of this was even supposed to be a celebration?

Was I tricked into simply helping her with one of her tasks?

Why don’t I just blow out the flame and wait for her in the bushes?

Actually, that’s not a bad idea. I wondered to myself if that was the better option. She wouldn’t have to know, but then again, what if she’s watching me? As I debated on what to do, I realized that I hadn’t been keeping track of how many paces I’d taken. Assuming I’d walked around forty, I simply started from there and hoped for the best. I quietly began counting beneath my breath before noticing a light in the distance.

Immediately, my body tensed up and I felt my stride becoming clumsy. Now, more than ever, I was incredibly cautious of every single movement. The very act of trying to appear normal was now having the opposite effect as my legs became stiff and awkward. As I came closer, I saw that the light belonged to not just a single person, but a group of people. They appeared to be guards travelling together, for what reason I couldn’t tell. In total there had to be around six or eight of them. There were two Tomas and the rest appeared to be Soras

The moment they saw me, their attention seemed to shift towards the lamp. As much as this was a symbol of authority in itself, it must have been obvious to them that a young Sora holding it didn't seem right.

Of all the paths they could have gone down, why this one?

"Good evening." The Toma holding the lamp said as he passed me.

"Good evening." I repeated, in the hopes that this interaction would end at just that.

For a brief moment it seemed my hopes would come true, however, one of the Soras turned around and called out to me. "Where are you heading?" Acting as if I didn't hear him, I kept walking, however, the Sora simply decided to repeat himself. "Where are you heading?" Before adding, "That lamp doesn't belong to you, does it?"

Stopping in place, I quickly had to come up with something. "I'm delivering this lamp to..." I paused for a moment as my mind blanked on what I should call Maia. "It's for a *Medic* who requested it."

I could hear as the rest of the group stopped. Immediately, I felt my heart sink, but trying to pretend that everything was normal I began walking once more. That's when I heard the same voice call out to me a third time, except with more authority in his voice now. "Stop. Identify yourself."

"Six-Two-Four-Five," I added an extra number and only turned my head so that they wouldn't see my armband.

"Six-Two-Four-Five?" The Sora responded, his voice filled with doubt. "You seem young to have a rank like that. Show us your arm band."

Why are the guards interrogating me so thoroughly?

This isn't normal.

Trying to think of something quickly, I blurted out, "I was instructed to hurry and not stop for anything. This is an emergency, and you're—"

"It'll only take a moment. Show us your identification number." Stepping out of the group, the Sora had an Overseer armband, number *twenty-six*.

"I'm sorry, but I have no time to comply." I loudly stated as I walked away, much faster than before. "If you continue to stop me then you'll have to answer for delaying my task."

"STOP!" The Overseer shouted loudly. "Take another step and you'll be killed!"

I could hear the distinctive sound of a crossbow being loaded. There was little chance of me escaping this situation. What should I do now? The moment they see my armband they'll know I'm lying.

Beg for your life!

Run into the woods!

The trees might block arrows, but what about—

One of the Tomas began stomping over towards me. Immediately, I broke out into a cold sweat as images of what happened before started flashing in my mind. I reached for my waist but realized I'd left my dagger at the house. Knowing what was about to come, I felt as though I were going to vomit from the sheer stress alone. I desperately wanted to run, but the reality was clear to me. There was no chance I'd be able to escape the entire Academy trying to apprehend me.

"Who goes there? Halt!" Another guard suddenly called out. The Toma stopped in his tracks and we all turned to the source of the commotion.

"What's happening here?" Maia's voice suddenly called out, nearly bringing me to my knees in gratitude. As soon as they saw her armband, the group stood at attention.

"Ma'm this individual refuses to identify himself." The Overseer responded. "Considering the recent escape we—"

"This boy was under my orders to deliver medicine to another Medic who needed it. I rushed over because I gave him the wrong item. Move along and stop bothering my assistant."

"I understand Ma'm, but his story doesn't align. He said he was delivering—"

"What part of *move along* do you not understand?" Maia said, raising her voice. "If you continue to impede us, I'm going to ensure each and every one of you is held accountable for whatever happens should this medicine not get there on time. I sent this boy with *my* lantern for a reason." She proceeded to snatch it from my hand and held it up for the others to see. "You see that crest? Now get out of my sight!"

"Apologies Ma'am! May you have a good evening!" One of the guards almost yelled, which quickly led to the others bowing their heads and quickly making an exit from the situation. The fact that she even managed to scare away an Overseer was surprising to say the least.

Once they were out of earshot, Maia smacked the back of my head. "What the hell did you do to attract so much attention? I gave you one task and you completely fucked it up!"

"I didn't do anything to—" The anger that somehow permeated behind her faceless stare was enough to quiet me. "I'm sorry, Maia. Thank you."

"Here, hold the lamp. I need to get something from those bushes." I could assume that whatever she had hidden there was what we'd come here for. What was so important that I had to risk my life like that? While waiting for her to grab the item out of the bush, I inspected the lamp. It did indeed seem to have more to it than its function. Near the bottom of it, there was a golden cog with the number 4 engraved onto it. Before I could ask her what this meant, she returned, cradling a few glass bottles in her arms. "Once we get back, we're gonna do a lot of talking. You better have been serious about not being able to sleep. If you pass out before me, I won't accept an apology this time."

It was hard to say whether or not she was actually doing any of this for my sake or for her own reasons. Whatever was in those bottles seemed irrelevant to helping me and instead seemed like something she wanted. How did I know this? Because her stern voice now had a hint of joy in it. Even

the way she walked was more upbeat than usual. As I wondered what was in those bottles, she turned around and motioned for me to stay quiet. Pushing me in the direction of where we'd come from, she quickly instructed, "Walk and act normal." Seconds later, a pair of Soras flew overhead. Once they were gone, she leaned over and whispered, "Keep quiet until we get back. Looks like there's more guards patrolling than normal tonight. If someone stops us again, I'll handle it."

I nodded, but in the end our worries were thankfully for nothing. Our walk home was fairly peaceful, or at least as peaceful as it could be under such circumstances. Upon walking up the familiar path and seeing her house, I felt a great weight lifted from my shoulders. She handed me the bottles and instructed me to carry them inside. Meanwhile, she took the lamp and extinguished it.

Entering the house, I noticed it was dead silent. The other girls must already be sleeping. Placing the bottles on the table, they clinked as they bumped into each other and it seemed to almost echo across this empty house. Despite living here for who knows how long, there wasn't much furniture or signs of Maia decorating much. The house had the bare essentials and that was about it. Despite most of the Academy being this way, certain areas, especially those dedicated to the Gods, featured lots of decorations everywhere. It made things feel warmer. I never realized it until now, but even if she had the luxury of her own house and all the privileges that came with her rank, I doubt she didn't feel a sense of loneliness in a place like this.

Taking a closer look at the bottles, I finally realized what these were. They were the wine bottles we use during ceremonies to honor the Gods. Had I just been taken to rob a storeroom again? The thought filled me with a great amount of shame and even dread. I could only hope that the Gods would forgive me for committing the same transgression a second time, even if it was entirely without my knowledge.

As bad as all of this seems, I suppose I am a bit curious as to what *wine* even is. The Chaplain and his helpers would drink small bits of it during ceremonies. Most of it was poured onto offerings that would be burned, and the little that remained would be sprinkled onto the fire itself, causing the flames to become more lively for a moment. Was that a sign that the Gods accepted it, or was this stuff simply flammable? It's safe to drink, at the very least, and if it's good enough for the Gods and their servants, then it must be special.

I heard the door close once more and soon after footsteps steadily grew louder until they stopped right behind me. The proceeding silence confused me. Turning around to see if anything happened, I was met with her chest which caused me to look away. She had a slight chuckle at my reaction before calling my attention back.

"You wanted to talk, right?"

"Yes I did... I was curious about the escape. I also wanted to—"

“You ever had this before?” She didn’t bother moving around me and instead reached forward, pinning me against the table as she grabbed the bottle. “It’s pretty good stuff. I’m not sure where it comes from, but it’s one of the few things I actually like about this place.”

“Well, if it’s meant for the Gods then I’m not surprised it’s high quality... I just wish we hadn’t stolen it from them.” She gave me a look that immediately put me on the defensive. “Do you not believe in them either? Even if the Academy forced their beliefs onto me, I don’t think the Gods are mere stories. How else would you explain the world around us? Even my own fortune feels unreal to explain otherwise.”

“You’ve got the wrong idea. I’m not judging you, kid. I just think it’s silly to think that the Gods wouldn’t want us to enjoy this stuff too. We’re all their beloved creations, aren’t we? So what’s the difference between you, me, and some priest?” She gripped the cork tightly and began her struggle to open it. With twisting motions, she finally managed to jiggle the cork out more and then suddenly, with a *pop* the bottle was open. Taking a whiff of the contents inside, Maia seemed rather pleased. I had thought she’d pour it into a cup, but she drank straight from the bottle itself. When she finished taking a large swig, a satisfied smile grew upon her face and she closed her eyes. “Ah, that’s the stuff...”

“What’s it like?”

Snapping out of her bliss, she grabbed a bottle and moved it over towards me. “Just grab one. You think I was going to drink all of this by myself?”

Doing as she said, I grabbed the glass container and held it in my hand. It was shaped rather strangely. The bottom was rounded but the neck of the bottle was skinny and longer than it likely needed to be. Grabbing the cork, I tried to pull it out but found that it was completely stuck. Seeing my struggle, Maia set hers on the table and proceeded to try herself. Surprised by how tightly it had gotten stuck, she grabbed a nearby rag and used it to help her grip. After a bit more struggle it finally popped open.

“These things are almost impossible to pop open sometimes.” She placed the rag down on the table and picked her bottle back up. “It’s more than worth the effort though.”

Handing it back to me, I took a whiff of whatever was inside. To my surprise, it smelled very sweet but I couldn’t really tell what it was. Lifting up part of my face covering, I hesitantly took a sip before immediately recoiling from the strange experience. It was all at once sweet, somewhat bitter, produced an aroma within my throat and nose, and burned slightly. Once I’d recovered from this strange experience, I raised my bottle towards Maia.

“I think this one’s gone bad.”

She laughed rather loudly at my statement. It was almost to the point that I worried she’d wake the others and even be heard outside. Snatching it from my hand, she took a swig and shook her head.

“That’s just how it tastes, kid.”

“This is what they use to worship the Gods?”

Handing it back to me, she playfully lifted up the rest of my face covering before I pulled away. “Kids like you just don’t have the taste for it yet, but give it some time. You’ll get used to it eventually. Maybe that’s why the Gods like this stuff so much, you know, since they’re ancient and all.”

“Do you believe in them?” I asked, knowing she still considered herself an outsider.

“I know they exist better than anyone.” She placed her hand on my side and for a moment I felt a strong warmth as her hand began glowing. It was only to emphasize her point though and she quickly stopped. “The issue comes down to the whole thing being way more complicated than we could ever understand.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that there’s more out there than just the Gods.” From the tone of her voice and the look in her eyes, I could tell this wasn’t one of her strange jokes. “It’s not something I want to talk about, but every one of my kind eventually learns this. It’s easy to get so caught up in this world that you forget about what lies beyond it. I’m still trying to understand it myself but... What I’m trying to get at is that you’d better be careful about the things you do. Sooner or later, your actions are going to catch up. When they do, you can only hope that the good ones outweigh the bad.” I wasn’t sure how to respond to such a cryptic warning and I suppose she realized how dreary the mood had gotten. Grabbing onto my hood suddenly, she began trying to take it off. “Come on! I’m over here saying this serious crap and I don’t even get to see whether or not you’re actually taking it in!”

“I am!” I nearly yelled as I fought back against her with my free hand. “Why are you always trying to do this?”

Letting go, she simply asked in a straightforward manner, “Would you take it off for me, please?”

“I just don’t understand why it’s so important. Shouldn’t you be used to this as well?”

“That’s why I want you to take it off. I am used to it. I don’t want to be.”

It was hard to refuse her when she was sincerely asking like this. Just as I was about to remove it, I suddenly remembered something. “I’ll do it on one condition.”

“Oh?” She seemed amused by my statement. “I didn’t think you’d actually be willing to do it.”

“You said before I’d have to get used to it eventually... Either way, my condition is that you’re not allowed to do anything strange towards me for the remainder of the night. If you do, I’ll put my hood back on and ignore you.”

“Aww, come on, don’t be like that! We’re both just having a little fun.” Seeing that I wasn’t budging, she finally relented. “Fine, if I do anything you don’t like then you’re free to say so... But you know, if you hated this stuff so much you wouldn’t keep seeking me out like this.”

“I—I’m only seeking you out because I’m bored and the others are busy.”

“Really? I thought you wanted to talk about our plans for escape?” Seeing that she had caught me in a lie, she proceeded to use it against me. “Since you’re being such a little liar, it’s not fair for me to

have to agree to your terms, but you know what? I'll accept them because that's how nice of a person I really am. Come over here."

Grabbing onto my hood once more, I allowed her to take it off this time. When she did, I couldn't help but look away out of reflex, but this didn't stop her from suddenly grabbing my cheek and pinching it. Despite promising me to not do anything strange, she had already started the night with this.

"You act like I haven't seen your face before."

"I know you have but—"

"Actually, I've seen *a lot more* than just your face. Who do you think was keeping you clean and changing your clothes—"

"I-I get the point, Maia... You don't need to remind me."

Abruptly changing topics, she seemed to intentionally try and catch me off-guard. "About earlier, what happened for you to attract so much attention to yourself?"

"I didn't do anything." I protested before elaborating. "I'd done just as you said. While walking down the path, I suddenly encountered another group, but since I was holding the lantern all I could do was continue walking as if nothing were happening."

"And it never occurred to you that you could have just turned the lantern off and hid the second you saw that light?"

"I did, but you ordered me to—"

"You want to be a free person, don't you? Out there, you're going to have to think for yourself. You can't rely on me or anyone else to tell you every single thing you need to do. If you can't grow a little more backbone and realize when you should disobey things people tell you to, you're either going to end up dead or enslaved to another person."

"I... I understand what you're saying, it's just that at the time I thought you had a good reason to order me to do that."

"I did. I wanted to see what you would do if you ran across someone else. At any point you could have snuffed that fire and hid, even from the start. You saw how that thing lights itself anyways. You have to think about *all* your options, and not just the ones given to you. What if something had happened to delay me? You were less than a minute away from getting captured or killed!"

"I understand..." I replied, repeating myself almost reflexively, however, this seemed to annoy her.

"Don't just agree with me! Say something back!"

"What do you mean? What exactly am I supposed to say in this situation? I know I failed."

She let out a frustrated sigh and made me drink more of that strange drink. As I struggled to down it, she began chastising me more.

“Be more honest with yourself and the people around you. Doesn’t it piss you off when other people tell you what to do?”

I stopped drinking and responded, “It depends on what they’re telling me to do and why.”

“I guess that’s a good point... Alright, let’s use an example. What do you think about that drink?”

“It’s... something I’m not used to.” Her eyes narrowed as she looked at me and I felt a chill run down my spine. “I-I’m telling you the truth. It’s something I’ve never—”

“Yeah, you’re technically right but it’s obvious you’re just hiding behind your words. You don’t like the taste, right? You find the whole thing weird, don’t you?”

“I... Yes, it’s not exactly what I expected. I’m confused as to why it’s meant as an offering for the Gods. Not that I mean to say—”

“Right there!” She reached across and pinched my lips shut. “Stop trying to mince your words and don’t just do what others tell you to. Those are your takeaways from this, got it?”

I nodded and she let go. As soon as she did, however, there was a question I had. “If I’m agreeing, then aren’t I simply doing what *you* want me to do?”

She seemed stunned by my observation. Setting down the bottle and holding her face in her hands, she let out an annoyed grunt. “You know what? Damn this conversation. I’m not drunk enough to deal with you.”

Quickly getting to her feet, she grabbed her bottle and left the table area, heading back towards the couch. Wondering if I had upset her, I followed after grabbing my own bottle.

“Maia?”

“I’m just moving somewhere more comfortable. Come take a seat too.”

Sitting beside her, I took a deeper drink of the wine as she seemed halfway done with hers. Although it tasted strange at first, I slowly found myself getting used to its flavor. The more I drank, the less I noticed the taste and the more I felt it having some sort of impact on my body. My head felt a bit more light and my airways seemed to be opening up as if I were exercising. The fact that it was making the aching in my body go away was rather miraculous.

Is this the secret as to why this drink is so special?

At first, we simply drank in silence, however, soon after Maia began acting strangely again. At first she was simply kicking my foot with hers, but soon after she was moving closer to me. As I moved away from her, I reminded her about what I’d said earlier.

“You said you wouldn’t do anything strange.”

“I’m not!” She said, faking offense. “If it really bothers you then you can tell me to stop.”

“Then stop.”

“You’re no fun.”

She got up and went to get another bottle as apparently she finished hers. When she came back, I noticed she had two with her. Was she really planning on drinking all of that by herself? As I went to take a sip, I suddenly felt the bottle tip up and I began to nearly choke on the wine. Finally regaining control of it, I coughed out the bit that had gone into my lungs before turning to Maia.

“Whoops!” She gave a playful smile as she offered me another bottle. “Come on and drink up. It’ll be the last chance we get to do something like this.”

“You mean, before the escape, right?”

“I mean, in general. This house, this place... You—I guess you wouldn’t really understand what it feels like.”

“Well, in a way, I am leaving all that I’ve ever known behind.”

“I guess so...” She rubbed the back of her neck as she tried to explain her thoughts. “It’s just that I’ve been leaving things behind my whole life. Even a place that I hate still holds some decent memories.” Looking back at me, her voice softened. “Would you be shocked if I told you I’m scared of screwing this up? Don’t tell the girls, but until now I genuinely didn’t think there was a chance. I tried making plans to do it years ago, but my suspicious behavior ended with Reko being assigned to monitor me. Ironical considering the fact that he actually attempted an escape, but I guess the Academy believed they’d truly reined him in after wiping his memories.

Sometimes I envy how much of an optimistic idiot he is. He seriously doesn’t flinch at the idea of trying again a second time. I’ve had multiple chances to escape, but every time, I doubted myself. Unlike Soras or Tomas, our gifts aren’t uniform with the rest of our race. They’re *borrowed*, like a Sora’s, but... Well, it’s hard to explain. The important aspect is that they vary wildly from person to person. My gift manifests itself in my ability to heal. It’s only really useful if I have other people around. On my own, I can’t use it to defend myself or do anything useful. We have no control over what we’re born with. These gifts can range from mostly useless to powers that you could never imagine. The only way to change this is—” She stopped herself and seemed reluctant to say more. “Look, once you see the kinds of things my people can do, you’ll understand why we have to keep it all a secret. Whether or not you’ll want to be around me after, I don’t know.”

It was a surprise to see her look so vulnerable. Whatever she was hiding worried me, but I couldn’t help but pity her in some way. Although she has her issues, has she not been good to me? I couldn’t imagine casting her away over something she has no control over. Breaking the silence, I felt nervous to speak, but I tried to be direct and not mince my words as she had told me to.

“It’s hard to trust you when you keep so many things hidden from me. I know you made it clear early on that I shouldn’t try to know more about you, but you’ve done a lot for me. Even if I don’t like the way you treat me at times, or the way your mood swings wildly as well, I still owe you a debt of gratitude.” She looked a bit surprised by my words. Seeing the good reception, I continued. “You saved my life, fed, clothed, and even cleaned me while I was near death. You’ve helped me more

than anyone ever has. It's hard for me to find the words, but I find it hard to imagine you'd do something worse to me than what the Academy has already done." I stopped for a moment as I searched for what to say next. She was surprisingly silent. "I'm not sure what you've done in your past or what you've done for the Academy for them to treat you so well, but it's hard for me to judge you. I have no idea who I was in my past life. All you know is who I am now and as far as I'm concerned, the person you are right now is the woman who's saved my life on more than one occasion. I'm not sure what's eating away at you, but whatever it is, as long as you continue to treat me and the others well, I won't abandon you."

Her silence puzzled me, but as I turned to look, I realized that she was avoiding my gaze. Curious, I moved forward slightly only to hear her let out a slight chuckle. I was confused until I saw her turn around with a genuine smile on her face. Her usual stern, angry, or mischievous expressions were nowhere to be found. She almost seemed like a different person.

"You really are such a little idiot, you know that?" Although it was an insult, it didn't seem that way as she laughed and threw herself back, lying down with her legs folded to the side. "You forgave that little friend of yours after she left you for dead and now you're saying you won't leave my side even if I was a monster in my past. You understand how naive that is? Someone's gonna hurt you real bad someday... You've got to get some sense into that head of yours before it's too late."

"I wouldn't be surprised if Rosalia thinks the same..."

"Anybody who cares about you is bound to worry since you seem so clueless."

"You care about me?" I asked, my genuine surprise clearly showing.

"A little. I've got to admit you've grown on me. Say... come here for a sec." I was confused as she motioned for me to get closer. Wondering if she had something to tell me in secret, I did as she said; however, I soon found myself pulled in forcefully. "Gotcha!"

I struggled for a moment before quickly giving up in order to not injure myself. Maia's arms, and even her legs, wrapped around my body tightly. With how close we were, I could smell the scent of the wine still lingering in her breath.

"Maia?"

"What? You've never been hugged before? Just shut up and enjoy it." The way she embraced me was very different from Rosalia. It was forceful and felt more selfish; however, just like with her other actions, there was some genuine affection as well. Being squeezed between her and the back of the couch, there wasn't much room to move. My head was in an awkward position where I was nearly being smothered by her breasts. As soft as they were, the thought of what she might say if she noticed this made me anxious. Despite my worries, I found that her grip on me loosened and her voice became gentle. "Times like these, you have to take your time to savor them. They won't be here forever, and before you know them, they're gone... When I first brought you here, I genuinely thought you were going to die. You were in such bad condition that it felt like a waste to spend so much time and energy

trying to save you. To be honest, it wouldn't have really mattered much to me if you did. People die all the time. It would set my plan back a bit, but there would always be other opportunities... Now, I don't think I'd have it in me to throw you away like that."

She began to stroke my head upon finishing her sentence. It surprised me at first, but I slowly felt myself succumbing to this comforting feeling. Closing my eyes, I only heard her voice.

"I take back what I said about you before, about being *average*. You really aren't, and I don't mean that in a bad way, kid. You don't find too many people willing to risk their necks for strangers, or showing as much gratitude as you've shown me. You make me feel like a much better person than I really am... It means a lot, even if you don't realize it." She stopped stroking my head and tightened her hold on me. "It might just be the alcohol making me feel a bit more sentimental, but I want you to remember something. If things go wrong... If it comes down to it... Don't you dare think of giving up your life for me. You're the kind of idiot that would do that sort of thing. I'm not worth it."

"Maia..." I could feel the pain in her voice. As I tried to look up, she kept my head down by resting her cheek on the top of my head.

"Should it all go well, I'm not gonna force you all to stay with me. I know what I said before, but I've been thinking and... I have no guarantees that the other Academy won't trap those girls there as well. After everything I'm going to put you all through, even I don't have the heart to lead you into another trap. As for the money... I'll figure something else out."

"What about Reko?"

"I have a feeling he won't want me around... There's a lot of things I kept hidden from him, and unlike you, he's not the kind of person who could ignore the things I've done. Even someone of his rank doesn't really know all the things the Academy gets up to. For a while now, I've thought of ways to keep it all hidden, but I'm tired of living this kind of life. The best case scenario is that you all will want to part ways with me. Worst case—"

"I wish you'd just tell me."

"It'd just ruin the moment. Either way, now that you more or less promised me, I'm not letting you go." She curled around me like a snake squeezing its prey. "Until we get far away from this place, you're stuck with me. Even if you end up hating me, our chances of survival are a lot better together. At the very least, the two of us need to get past the swamp."

"What about the others? Why just me?"

"I need you because you're a Sora. If the others want to go their own way once we escape, that's their decision." She plainly said, before soon adding, "Also, once we get past that part, we'll be able to journey south by boat to the desert. There's a town there that holds a big festival around Spring. We should be able to make it. It'll be where we part ways, but I'm sure you'll be able to live a much better life there. Think of it as me repaying your efforts since we won't be getting that money now."

“I appreciate it... but, I don’t want to leave Rosalia behind. Even if I’m free, it won’t mean much if I’m all alone in a place I know nothing about.”

“I guess I see your point.” Thinking for a moment, she gave up and shrugged her shoulders. “That’ll be up to you. You’re going to need to convince her... or *them*, I guess. At the end of the day, they’ll be just as free as you or me... *Or* if you really want me to, I could think of a way to trick them into staying. Don’t know how that’ll go though.” I didn’t like the thought of leaving Rosalia behind. If we went our separate ways, I’d likely never find her again. Still, deceiving them into staying? That didn’t sound good either. If the journey is seriously that difficult, would it be better to part ways? I wouldn’t be able to bear it if my own selfishness got them killed. “Just think about it.”

Although it seemed like the conversation was finished, she didn’t let go of me. Rather, I felt her lean more heavily on me as though she were falling asleep. Even when I moved a bit, she didn’t react. Despite there being no blanket to cover us, the warmth of her body was more than enough to feel comfortable. In all honesty, being held so snugly by her was one of the best sensations I’ve felt thus far.

This is better than any blanket could ever be.

Beneath all the abuse and abrasive traits, Maia had her own kindness that was different from Rosalia’s, but still just as sweet. Finally allowing myself to relax, the tension left my body as I snuggled up against her. With my eyes growing heavy, whether I wanted to or not, I couldn’t keep myself awake. I fell into a deep sleep. It was the deepest sleep I’ve ever had, and the first time I’ve had a vivid dream I could remember.

At the start of it, I was lying in a field staring straight up at the sky. The sun was shining down from somewhere that I couldn’t see and the sky was a vibrant blue the likes of which I’d never seen before. There were no buildings in sight, just the beauty of the world as the Gods had made it. With the wind rolling the grass like waves in water, I felt a great sense of peace until I suddenly heard a voice call out to me.

“Hey!”

As I turned to look, I vaguely made out what appeared to be a hooded figure. It somewhat resembled an Academy uniform, but they were too far for me to get a good view. As the person waved to me, I lifted my arm but felt no weight. Puzzled by this, I turned to look at my arm but instead my vision was somehow forced back to this strange person. All at once, I realized I was not in control of myself.

“You *need* to...”

The voice grew faint and was so hard to hear that I couldn’t even tell if it was feminine or masculine. The more I tried to focus, the harder it became to see this person. It was as though becoming aware that this whole thing was abnormal began to kick me out of the dream. The world began to lose its color and shape and soon the edges of my vision began to grow white. Before I knew it,

I felt my eyes opening and I was staring at the ceiling of Maia's house, utterly confused as to what just happened.

I quickly got up to search for Maia, remembering the events of the night before, but she was nowhere to be found. Why did I suddenly have a dream now of all times? There was a feeling within me that something was important about it, yet I couldn't make sense of a single thing. Looking around, I noticed that the bottles from yesterday were still there. Were it not for these things, I might even think the entirety of last night was a dream as well.

Sitting in the silence of the room, I felt annoyed that I couldn't get more out of such a rare occurrence. Was there more to it that I had simply forgotten? It was possible. Most of all, who was that person calling out to me? They didn't seem familiar, but I felt a strange sense of peace when I heard their voice. This mystery is going to drive me crazy all day. Adding to that, where did Maia disappear off to?

Chapter XII

Hellish Sand

As far as I could tell, Maia had somehow slipped out at some point without me ever noticing. Such peaceful sleep is more dangerous than I thought. Being so oblivious to the world around me, anything could have happened without me noticing. Now that she was gone, there wasn't much for me to do. It was a return to my uneventful day to day.

Feeling quite good this morning, I decided to use some leftover material from the rope to make myself a sling. Since I had a lot of time on my hands, I figured this would come in handy. Unlike the bow, I could easily wrap this around my waist and hide it beneath my jacket while carrying some rocks in one of my pockets. I was already used to using these, and best of all, it could also prove handy later on for hunting. Although I was decent with a bow, the fear of losing or breaking arrows would bother me too much. Comparatively, finding good rocks wasn't too hard. There was really no competition between the two for the journey ahead.

Not having seen them since yesterday, my best guess was that Senga and Rosalia were still holed up in Maia's room. This meant I could work in peace. Although they only taught us this once, the process wasn't too complicated, or different, from making the rope itself. The hardest part was making the pouch for the stones as I had no leather on me... I think I can also weave together one from the material of the rope itself, but I don't exactly remember how to do that part and I wasn't that good at it either way. Leather would be necessary if I wanted to make a good one. I looked around the room, trying to spy anything made of leather or at least close enough to substitute. Seeing nothing, I was about to stand up to search a different area when I remembered that I was literally sitting on piles of animal skins. I'm sure Maia won't notice if I take just a bit. Then again, why should she care? Not like we can take this couch with us.

Once I had the material to make the pouch, there weren't any more complications. The process was faster than I thought it'd be, so I still had some time to test it out. On the surface, there was a practical reason for me testing the quality, but in all honesty I just thought it'd be fun to sling rocks around for a while. Once I made it outside, I found a good tree for a target and made sure there was cover nearby in case I had to hide from a Sora.

I don't think Maia healed me last night, but I felt well enough to be able to shoot rocks with about the same power and accuracy as I used to be able to. Every time I launched a rock and hit the tree, it would make a satisfying *thwack* sound. The whole thing was surprisingly relaxing, and a nice change from what I usually did around this time of day. The only thing that was slightly annoying was having to check the skies after every hit.

As I was readying another throw, I suddenly felt as though someone were watching me. Quickly moving as fast as I could to the shade of a nearby tree, I looked around but didn't see anyone.

At first, I assumed it was plain paranoia, however, as I looked back towards the house I suddenly saw Senga staring at me through the kitchen window. I suppose the noise I was making had made her curious. Seeing that I'd noticed her, she quickly turned away and disappeared from sight.

Strange, but I didn't pay it much mind and continued on. After messing around a bit more, I got tired and went back inside to take a nap. I couldn't help but feel a bit of pride in my craftsmanship. Before sleeping, I had made sure to tie the sling around my waist so I wouldn't forget it. For all intents and purposes, it was now a part of me like any other piece of my uniform.

When I woke up to relieve myself, I saw that it was the dead of night. I'd overslept and missed my chance to speak to Maia. After what had happened, I'm not sure if this was a good or bad thing. Despite some of the anxiety I felt, I badly wanted to see her again. Disappointed, I took care of my business and returned to the house where I saw that food had been left for me. I suppose the others had remembered to not eat more than their fair share this time. Not wanting their kindness to go to waste, I enjoyed what was left and slept some more.

In the morning, after a normal night of no dreams, I opened my eyes to see the ceiling of Maia's house again. It's something I'd grown used to by now and was becoming a comforting sight to see. Stretching my legs, I expected to feel my muscles unwind; however, I instead felt something soft and out of place near my feet. Confused by this, I sat up quickly only to see a truly strange sight I wasn't expecting.

Napping at the opposite end of the couch was Rosalia, tucked into the corner so that she wouldn't disturb me. Much like before, she lay half sitting, and half resting her head on the armrest of the couch. Her hair was messy and parts of it were covered in a black, sand-like substance. There was a strange stink to her, as though she'd handled something both rotten and burnt, but it wasn't strong enough to completely repulse me. As odd as all of this was, I was overjoyed to realize she'd come here to see me.

My first instinct was to wake her so that I could hear her voice, but I decided to hold myself back since she looked so peaceful. With how disheveled her appearance was, it seemed as though she'd been hard at work. Perhaps I should do something nice for her instead. Recently, Reko had been delivering more and more supplies meant for our travel once we escaped. As such, today there was more food in the kitchen than we could ever manage to pack from the look of things. Loading the board with a larger portion than normal, I took advantage and put an extra portion of meat for her since I knew her preference for it over bread and cheese.

Making my way back, I set the food down on the small stand near the couch. Although I didn't want to wake her, something I noticed made me wonder if she was truly even asleep in the first place. Despite her eyes being closed, one ear stood up at attention and seemed to react to noises I made.

Oh Gods, please forgive me. You know I try, but... It's hard to not compare her to the other creatures you have made in this world.

My curiosity piqued, I couldn't help but test out the function of this strange ability. "Rosalia." I whispered into her ear, causing it to twitch in response. For a moment, I thought she had been faking it, but she quickly opened her eyes and seemed genuinely startled upon seeing me.

"Wuh—Captain?" She quickly backed away before rubbing the sleep from her eyes. "Heh, I guess I fell asleep while waiting for you."

"I wouldn't have minded had you woken me up."

"But you need your rest, dummy. We went over this before."

"Except now I'm fine—well mostly. Anyways, what's this black material you're covered in? It's all in your hair as well."

"Oh that, I was busy so—"

"And your hair is a mess as well." I began to smooth out the strands of her hair that stuck out while brushing away some of the black sand. She moved away from me and grabbed my hand as I neared her ears.

"Captain! I-I can do it myself!"

Damn, I was so close.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable. It's been a while, hasn't it?"

"Yeah it has..." She replied a bit awkwardly before suddenly adding. "I've missed you, Captain." A blush came to her face that caught me off-guard.

"Oh, I-I missed you as well." It felt as though someone had reached into my chest and squeezed my heart.

Why do I suddenly feel so nervous?

Should I say something else?

Why is it suddenly so hard to interact with her?

"Captain?" Her voice snapped me out of my thoughts as I tried to focus on what she was saying. "Are you there?"

"Sorry, I... What are we talking about?"

"Geez, I was just asking if you wanted to help me with something. I figured you'd be pretty bored doing nothing all day, so doing something together would be a lot more fun, right? I've got a lot of cool things to show you too!"

"I wouldn't mind." I replied casually, trying to not let my eagerness show through too much.

"*I wouldn't mind*" She mimicked in a mocking manner. "Aww, c'mon and show a bit more enthusiasm, Captain! I'm gonna be showing you something that most people will never see in their lives. It's everything I've been working on this past week, PLUS the first time I've ever shown anyone other than Senga who I really am... or is it *what* I really am?"

"Are you not a Shinrin?"

“Huh?” She shook her head as if to physically shake away my question. “That’s not what I meant. It’s more like how you’re a soldier and Maia is a Medic. I’m... I’ll leave it a secret for now to add suspense!”

“Why does it feel like everyone has secrets...”

“Hm?”

“Nothing. Let’s start eating so we can get a start on whatever you have planned for us.”

I didn’t have to tell her again as she happily began digging in. It’s always rather astounding how she manages to eat more than I do considering the difference in our size. Where exactly does all that food go? Even more so because she’s rather thin.

Once I began to feel full, I stopped eating the meat and focused on bread and cheese. Quite honestly, I like this just as much, if not more, than the meat itself. Rosalia, however, noticed this and called it to my attention.

“You don’t have to give up your food for me. There’s still plenty more anyways, right?”

“There is, I’m just eating a bit more of what I enjoy.”

“Bread and cheese? Wouldn’t you rather have some of this tasty... umm, is it pork or beef or... maybe chicken?”

“I’m not sure, but regardless I really am—”

“You can’t really be full with just that, can you—” Picking up one of the sausages, I stuck it in her mouth in order to stop her from going on and on. I found it rather humorous but she seemed annoyed by my action. “Hey, what was that for? I could have choked!” Despite her protest, I noticed she began munching on it all the same.

“I’ve seen you stuffing your face for long enough to know that’s nearly impossible.”

“You’re not supposed to say something like that to a girl! That’s mean! You—” In the middle of her yelling, a small piece of food flew from her mouth and onto my face covering. Immediately she stopped speaking and put her hand over her mouth. “Whoops... Sorry.”

A bit disgusted, I picked the chewed up piece of food off and flicked it somewhere else. “Well, young *lady*, I think that’s enough food for me. I’m going to get some water.”

Rosalia seemed too embarrassed to say anything else. When I returned, I handed her a cup of water to drink and a rag to brush off the crumbs left behind. Although she took what I gave her, she seemed to want to show me something.

“Before we go outside, I thought it’d be good to teach you a little about the things you’re gonna see. That way you aren’t too confused by it all.” She was about to wipe her hands on her uniform when I stopped her.

“Use the rag, don’t dirty your uniform.”

“Oh, yeah.”

She proceeded to do as I said, seeming a bit too caught up in her own world. Now that her hands were clean, the girl suddenly began undoing the first two buttons of her uniform. Instinctively I looked away, but my curiosity soon called my attention back as I wondered what she was doing. Thankfully, she had already closed her jacket, however, in her hand she held the same small book I'd seen before. As she flipped through various pages, I caught glimpses of what looked like diary entries, mathematics, and drawings that were impressively detailed. It was hard to make out any words due to how fast she was flipping through them, however, she soon stopped on a page that seemed to have instructions for building an oil lamp. As she held it up for me to look at, I reached my hand out, but she reflexively yanked it away.

"Ah wait! T-There's a lot of stuff in here that's personal." Moving a bit closer to me, she kept the book firmly held in her hand, pointing to a diagram with the other. "Can you guess what this is?"

"An oil lamp?" The page was far too complicated for me to guess anything else. This didn't seem to be the right answer, but she encouraged me to keep looking. The shape of the thing felt strangely familiar. Thinking back to what Senga was making, and the fact that this thing appeared to have that thin rope at the top, it suddenly clicked in my mind. "Oh, we helped make that, didn't we? But why the spherical shape? Is this something you're meant to roll? Or... Is it to throw?" Seeing her eyes light up, I continued, "Is it a form of weapon? As in, throwing burning oil on people?"

"You're almost there!" Unable to contain her excitement, she finally gave me the hint that I needed. "Just think more... *Boom*." The way she motioned with her hands suddenly conjured images in my mind as to what happened at the ceremony. Noticing my astonishment, she grinned. "You remember, don'tcha?"

"I do and yet—I know to you it may seem obvious, but I genuinely need to ask, how is it even possible for you to be capable of that? I've never seen anything remotely close to it. If you've been able to do that this whole time, then it leaves a lot of questions that need to be answered."

"It's more complicated than just making things explode, but I'll show ya in a little bit." The girl absolutely beamed with pride and continued bragging. "There's actually three different kinds that I can make. I like to call the one you saw a *thunderball*. It's got a short fuse so that it catches people by surprise, and when it explodes, it releases all that smoke while making a loud *bang* sound."

"Just a noise? But didn't it kill that Toma?"

"I... I don't think it did." Her enthusiasm wavered for a moment but she quickly waved away the concern. "Nah, you really think a big guy like him would die from that? I mean, it's still an explosive, so it's not as if it can't hurt people, but a big Toma like him should have survived. It probably just knocked him out or something... *Maaaybe* some broken teeth or missing nose at worst."

The imagery made me shudder. "Gods, if I hadn't seen it happen, I'd doubt the things you're saying. For a girl like you to do that to a Toma of that size... If it's not a gift and rather something you're making, then why weren't you using them from the start? You've been captured twice now."

“Because I need to light it on fire. Also, if I’m too close I’d just get caught in the blast, dummy.”

“But didn’t I get caught in the blast instead?”

“Yeah but—Well, it was a calculated risk! But thanks to you, I got away and had enough time to light my last one. It worked out in the end, so isn’t that all that matters? Ehehe... I can’t see your face but I feel like you’re giving me a bad look. Is it that hard to trust what I’m saying? I guess it doesn’t matter. Once you see it you’ll understand. As strong as this stuff is, there’s a lot of downsides too. It takes specific materials to make it, lots of time and patience, and even once you want to use it, you still have to light it *and* make sure you’re far enough away.”

“Unless you’re me of course.”

“It was an emergency! Whatever, let’s just forget about that and get this show started! C’mon and help me, I promise it’ll be a ton of fun!”

Entering Maia’s room, I was confused by the lack of furniture. There was no bed. Instead, I could see where the girls had been sleeping on the floor as there were blankets messily bundled in the corner. Had they really been sleeping on the floor while allowing me to use the couch? I had always assumed Maia slept in here, but I suppose the couch was her bed. It made me feel a bit guilty despite having no way of knowing this until now.

The thing that occupied the majority of the room were the barrels the Toma delivered as well as a large table in the middle that had strange sets of glass cups, tubes, and all sorts of other items. It also had a larger, almost fireplace-like thing near the back wall. I didn’t really understand what all of these things were for, or why they were here, but it seems that this became Rosalia’s makeshift workshop for the past week. The table itself had been stained black, likely by the same thing Rosalia was covered in. The strange smell was much stronger here as well. If not for the window, it would have been torturous to sleep in here. Then again, this also meant they were sleeping with a window open during the colder nighttime...

Calling over my attention, Rosalia asked me if I was well enough to carry two sacks that were near the table. Showing her that I could, I lifted them up, much to her relief. Despite a slight soreness, I felt nearly back to normal. Gathering a few items from the table, Rosalia joined me as we walked out the building.

As Rosalia was closing the door and had her back to me, I snuck a glance as to what was inside the sacks. I’m not sure what I expected, but I was surprised to find that it was nothing more than a bunch of that black sand. Whatever it was, it didn’t stink as much as whatever else was in that room, but it certainly had hints of it along with a more burnt smell. Just touching the sacks had already stained my fingertips black. As far as I could surmise, this was the main component responsible for those explosions. Were you simply supposed to light this on fire to do such a thing? Suddenly, I didn’t feel very safe handling these sacks. Will anything happen if I accidentally drop them? Rosalia never gave me proper instruction as to—

I suddenly jumped as Rosalia tapped my shoulder. She saw that my curiosity had gotten the better of me and seemed amused by my response. If she were in my shoes, I doubt she'd do any better. She was keeping me ignorant of whatever this was on purpose, seemingly for her own entertainment. Thinking rationally, if this material was really that dangerous, it wouldn't be held in a simple food sack. She could have at least told me that much... but perhaps she has a bit of a sadistic side like Maia.

In the backyard, I set down the sacks, as per her instructions, and simply sat back and watched. She didn't want my help and seemed intent on doing it all herself. From the careful way she poured the black sand and the constant measuring she did, the girl seemed rather particular about this demonstration. She must have noticed that I was getting bored as she suddenly called out to me.

"Hey Captain, you know what this stuff is called?" Before I could even answer she told me herself. "It's called *black powder*. Kind of a boring name, huh?"

"Did you not give it the name?"

"The person who discovers it gets the right to name it whatever they want. Since I'm not the one who discovered it, I just call it by its given name out of respect. People give their whole lives sometimes just for a single discovery. I'd be pretty mad if I spent my whole life working on something and then they completely changed the name and forgot about me. Discoveries, like this black powder, are kind of like a form of *immortality*, y'know?"

"Unless it gets lost to time. We lost a lot of knowledge after the War of Damnation. It's good that you honor those that came before you, but there's no such thing as immortality other than our *eternal* souls."

"Yeah yeah, whatever, Captain. You'll see one day. I'm gonna make something so great that nobody will forget me no matter what happens. Maybe I'll even discover the *Elixir of Immortality* itself!"

"The what?"

"It's one of the things all *alchemists* try to create but haven't succeeded in creating... yet."

"You realize that the more unknown terms you add to our conversation, the more I'm going to struggle understanding what you're saying."

"Whoops... Guess I'm sorta throwing a lot at you at once. Then again, you're a smart guy so you'll get it if I just explain things to you!" Clearing her throat, she stopped what she was doing and turned around. With chest puffed out and hand on her hip, she began waving the finger of her other hand along with certain words to emphasize them. "Alchemy makes a lot of *things* but our goal isn't just to make things, but to understand the *how* and *why*. Just like how you can *purify* a metal ore, human souls can be purified too. Knowledge and actions are the foundation to doing it, so you can't just read books all day or just do a bunch of good deeds at random. You've gotta combine the two by understanding the world around us and using that knowledge to make it better, or more *pure* I guess. I know you're taught about souls coming from the gods and being controlled by them, but we don't

believe in gods... More like just a single god, or maybe *god* is the wrong word to use. Maybe it's better to think about it as a divine force that's represented by absolute purity. The way I was taught, the soul is just another element that's unique to living things, with human souls having unique properties that set it apart from animals, like being rational. In the same way that water evaporates under the hot sun and comes back as rain, the human soul gets recycled too. Everything is more or less returned and cycled through the world, over and over and over, but the highest goal of alchemy is to purify the soul and break the cycle of rebirth so that you can elevate yourself to this divine force. To do this, we're always looking to create an *elixir of eternal life*. It could be a real thing or just a metaphor, I think it's real! Either way, it's basically the highest form of purification an alchemist could ever achieve because they become untarnished by death."

It was a lot to take in at once, and almost seemed like insane ramblings compared to what I'd learned about the Gods here. Still, there was one thing that kept being mentioned that confused me. "Why the obsession with purity?"

She thought for a moment, trying to put it in a way I would understand, or perhaps even questioning her own understanding of it. Finally, she came up with an example I could follow.

"You know how a sword gets rusty over time?" I nodded and she continued. "That's because the iron, which a lot of your stuff is made from, gets tarnished over time from the air around us binding with the iron. There's something called, *oxygen*, that we breathe in, but also rusts stuff and causes all sorts of other reactions with things. Oh, now that I think about it, have you ever noticed that iron in water rusts more quickly? That's because there's actually oxygen in water and the water itself actually speeds up the process of oxygen binding to the iron."

"Oxygen is in the air we breathe... Strange, that sounds vaguely familiar to me. Maybe I was taught about it in my past life?"

"I wouldn't be surprised. Basic things like that are important to understand for alchemy, and since you sound educated, you probably learned a bit." Rosalia replied, impressed by my simple knowledge. "There's other stuff too but I don't want to confuse you any more. Anyways, oxygen and iron come together to form rust. This weakens the metal and eventually makes it break, right?" Nodding again, she finally wrapped up her explanation. "Rust is the result of an impurity in the iron. The more pure the iron, the better it can resist rust. When you think about it, the soul is like iron and the world around us is like the oxygen trying to bind to us and rust us. The best way to keep that from happening is to try and keep the soul pure. This makes it stronger... At least that's how I was taught, but now that I think about it, pure iron is weaker than iron alloys when it comes to making weapons and armor—Does that make the whole metaphor not work? I hadn't thought about that until now..."

"Why are you looking at me with such a confused face? I thought this was *your* explanation."

"It was, but now I'm kinda confused. I guess the point is the rust and not how it's useful in making things, right?"

“I’m not sure I follow anymore... It does sound like quite the conundrum though. Getting back to the origin of this entire lesson, wasn’t the point to teach me about the explosive powder you’ve made?”

“Oh! Hehe... sorry.” Trying to hide her embarrassment, she resumed her work on the demonstration while still speaking to me. “That’s a lot easier to explain. This stuff was actually supposed to be medicine, which is kinda ironic since it’s poisonous, but a lot of things in alchemy get found by accident. Story goes that the guy who invented it had combined the ingredients together because individually they treated things like poisoning, fever, and infections. His thinking was that it’d be a miracle medicine, but in the end all he had was something that looked like soot and totally didn’t work as intended. Writing it off as a failure, he put the powder into a glass jar to throw away in the morning and left it on his table so he wouldn’t forget. That’s where it would have ended BUT he made a big mistake! He’d forgotten to snuff out a candle he had been using to read. So what ends up happening? He wakes up in the middle of the night to a huge explosion!

BOOM now there’s a huge hole in his wall! The glass and force of the explosion also nearly kills him. His neighbors come to see what happened and end up saving him, but most of his house burns down anyways. He’s got no explanation to give to them and he’s in bad shape so they leave him alone to recover, probably in someone else’s house. As he’s laying in bed, he starts to think about why exactly his house randomly blew up. I mean, that stuff doesn’t just happen out of nowhere, right? That’s when he suddenly remembers the black powdery stuff and how he’d forgotten to snuff out the candle. Once he’s better, he immediately makes another batch, and after repeating the process, hopefully in a better place, a whole new discovery is made that would revolutionize the world... except he then dies during the big war that ruined everything. Thankfully, he taught his son, who taught his own son and that’s how I eventually learned it.”

“So the inventor’s grandson taught you? Was he your father?”

“Yup—well, actually, *sorta*. I remember him being like a dad to me, but we weren’t related. He would have taught Sunny too, but they never got along. Anyways, I’ll tell you about that some other time. Right now, it’s time for the demonstration to start!”

Seeing her pull out a firestarter, I suddenly realized what was about to happen and rushed over to grab her hand. “W-Wait, Rosalia! You’re not going to cause an explosion are you? It’ll draw attention.”

“Geez, were you not paying attention to the story? It has to be contained inside of something in order to explode. As it is right now, the worst it’ll do is burn a little and make some smoke. There’s fires being made all the time anyway, so it shouldn’t look any different.” Waving the firestarter in my face, she continued in a mocking tone. “You should have realized by now that I’m not dumb, Captain. If anything, I’m probably the smartest person you know.”

“Sure.”

“Hmph, that doesn’t sound very convincing, but you’re gonna be eating those words when you feast your eyes on this!” Right as she was about to strike the firestarter she hesitated. “Actually, let’s start with the small one first and work our way up... *Just in case.*”

“What do you mean?”

The excitement in her eyes shone just as brightly as the sparks that came out of the firestarter. The small mound of black powder on the floor immediately caught alight and shot out bright flames. For a second, it appeared no different from a normal fire, however, I soon saw that the bottom was slightly blue. The fire didn’t last long and soon began to die. However, as it did, it turned a violet color, confusing me greatly. Almost as quickly as the fire came, it disappeared into a puff of white smoke as if to signal the end of this presentation.

Immediately turning to Rosalia I asked, “Why was the fire that color? How did you do that?”

With a smug expression on her face, she nudged me while saying, “If you wanna know, I’ll take you on as an apprentice.”

“I don’t think making different colored flames is enough to subject myself to that.”

“Aww, c’mon! You make it sound like I’m going to do something bad to you. Hmm, maybe you’ll change your mind after this one.”

Her next demonstration looked like a line of black powder leading to a small pile of wood she’d brought along. I could guess as to what would happen, however, once she ignited the powder I was surprised by how the small flame almost *walked* its way over towards the pile of wood. Marching dutifully along the trail of black powder, it produced a considerable amount of smoke for the small amount of material it was burning. This concerned me for a moment until I saw what happened when the flame touched the wood. In an instant, there came an audible *whoosh* as the whole thing was engulfed in flames. A roaring campfire in mere seconds... The only issue was the large amount of smoke and the smell it left behind.

“Is it even safe to eat things cooked on a fire like that?”

“I think so...” She came closer to the fire and the smell must have been too strong for her as she turned away. “Well, maybe we’ll have to test it out some other day.” Throwing dirt into the fire, she extinguished it.

Even with the fire now gone, there was still a lot of smoke. In order to try and disperse it, I brought out my wings and took to fanning the smoke nearby before taking off. I hadn’t flown since the ceremony, but upon feeling the wind rush against my face, I felt a great sense of excitement. It’s been like an eternity since I’ve been able to move this freely. Even if I had to fly below the canopy in order to keep from being seen, it was a wonderful taste of freedom.

I did my best to spread the smoke so that the wind would further disperse it and make it less noticeable from afar. Although Rosalia was right about there being other fires, especially around this time of the year, too much smoke could still attract attention. During the Summer, a small fire broke

out in the woods and we were all scrambled to help extinguish it. It bore the same style of nearly pure white smoke at the start of it. Had it not been for the river that runs through the Academy, we would have lost much more than a few buildings and a small chunk of the forest. Now that I'm seeing Rosalia's presentation, I'm starting to wonder if this is the plan. Are we going to burn this place to the ground?

As I came back down, I noticed that Rosalia seemed quite happy. "You must be feeling a lot better, huh?" Was the first thing she said to me as I touched the ground. "I haven't seen you fly since we first met... and even then it was sorta straight into a wall. Still, I never knew you were that fast!"

Hearing her praise, I smiled back, but realized she couldn't see this. Instead, I helped remove a smudge of the powder from her face which received a mixed response.

"According to Maia, I'm built about as durable as a Toma. Thanks to her, and the Gods, I'm practically back to normal. I still have a few aches, but it's minor in comparison to how I was a week ago."

"I'm happy to hear that, Captain! Oh, if we have another chance before the escape, how about we do something you like next time? It's only fair since you helped me out today." Her chipperness carried on as she prepared me for the final part of her presentation. "Before you start worrying about this, just know that I've got everything under control. I remember doing this stuff in the past for fun, so I must have been good at it. The next one is only gonna take a few seconds at most so make sure you don't blink! I'll be really mad if you miss it!"

I had seen her dig a small hole earlier with her hands, which was already strange enough to behold by itself, however, she then proceeded to fill it with powder. Although I had some idea of what might happen, knowing she'd put the most care and attention into setting this one up put me on edge. Just as with the wood pile, there was a line of black powder leading to the hole. Once more, I watched as she walked up to the line and struck the firestarter against the flint she held in her other hand. Every time it didn't catch, I felt my heart skip a beat. Beneath my breath, despite it being against her wishes, I prayed that something would happen so she wouldn't go through with this. To my dismay, the sparks lit the powder and the flame marched its way toward the hole like an obedient soldier.

Unlike with the previous demonstrations, Rosalia ran back over towards me. Confused by this, I turned to look at her, but she pointed excitedly to the hole and urged me to watch. There wasn't much time to observe or debate what would happen before a giant pillar of flame shot out from the ground.

WHOOSH

At the same time, a great wind came, pushing the fire closer to us. In an instant, I reflexively grabbed Rosalia by her shoulders and threw her onto the ground, shielding her with my body. The

flames felt as though they were licking me, but right as it almost became unbearable, it disappeared. There was a moment of silence as all I could hear was my heavy breathing and pounding heart. Looking down at Rosalia, she seemed both stunned and confused.

“It shouldn’t have done that.” She argued despite me not having said a word. “It shouldn’t have been that strong.”

“It was just a mistake, right? Perhaps you just added too much.”

“But I measured it out beforehand and tested the batch before using it! That bag had the right amount! I know— Argh! This means that something is wrong!” Getting off of her, she immediately went to inspect the damage left behind. The hole had slightly burst out and all around it the grass was singed. She seemed quite angry, however, when she turned to look at me the expression on her face changed. “Are you alright?!”

I touched my back and realized my uniform was slightly singed, however, I didn’t feel as though I was burned too much. Quite luckily, the two of us seemed mostly unscarred from the experience.

“Don’t worry about me, it’s just a minor burn. We should be glad it wasn’t any worse.”

She didn’t bother to reply and continued to stare at the hole in the ground. “I just don’t get it. I remember doing stuff like this in the past over and over. Nothing was wrong with the other two demonstrations I showed you either. Why did this one react like that? These sorts of things don’t just change like that unless something else happens... Maybe something else got mixed into it beforehand? But then the question would be what exactly tampered with it... Maybe something in the ground?”

“Whatever is wrong, we still have time to fix it.” I went over and put my hand on her shoulder. While I didn’t understand what was happening, I still wanted to calm her down. “I’ll get rid of the smoke for now and then you can go back to focusing on whatever went wrong. This may come off as ignorant, but is it that much of an issue if the powder is a bit unstable? It’s serving as a distraction so as long as it makes a lot of noise and damage it should be good enough, shouldn’t it?”

She didn’t seem convinced by my attempt. “Now that I’m not sure about the quality of the powder, I can’t predict what’ll happen. If it’s too weak, the distraction won’t be enough... If it’s too strong, we can get caught in it.”

I wanted to say something else to comfort her, but I couldn’t deny that this was a serious problem we needed a solution for. Focusing on what could be fixed for now, I set off to disperse the smoke. In the process of doing this, I noticed that there was a lot more of it than I originally thought I saw. If I can’t get rid of this fast enough, it’ll be bad. Quite perplexingly, the more I tried to disperse it, the more it only seemed to grow.

This isn’t normal.

Flying closer to where it was thickest, my heart dropped upon realizing what was wrong. With embers dancing around, glowing like tiny berries. The thatched roof of Maia's house was smoldering and birthing small fires.

"Rosalia! The roof caught light! We need to get water, RIGHT NOW!"

"Fire?!" She looked at me with utter terror in her eyes. "We need to run!"

"No! The house is—"

"It's filled with black powder! The whole thing is full of it! We'll die the second any of that fire gets through! We can't put it out in time!"

Upon hearing that, I knew that whatever peace I had enjoyed until now was finally over. The times of strife were coming back with a vengeance. Much like Maia had feared, our plans were coming apart in horrific fashion. Had Rosalia not been here, I may have simply crumpled to the ground in grief.

Why couldn't things have stayed the same?

Abandoning any attempt to save the house, we ran away into the forest. In such a short time, that house had become the closest thing I'd ever known to a home. Now, all I could do was take one last look as it burned away. Whatever hope for the future I may have once had was seemingly disappearing into those clouds of smoke. Gripping Rosalia's hand, I found myself doing this not because I wanted to guide her, but because the fear inside of me was overwhelming. I feared for my life.
I feared for the battle to come.
Most of all, I feared that I would never know happiness again...

Chapter XIII

Hellfire

I did my best to hold onto Rosalia as we desperately ran through the thick forest underbrush. Despite our efforts, it was an impossible feat to keep our balance amidst all the tree roots and other foliage. At times we would stumble and fall, occasionally taking a nasty spill that would require the help of the other getting up. Even through the pain we ran, our uniforms becoming torn and our legs scraped and bloodied as we threw caution to the wind. I had no real idea where we were going. Were we near the edge of the Academy's borders or had we unknowingly ventured deeper within it?

It doesn't matter if we die from the explosion.

In contrast to our frantic sprinting, the world around us was as it had always been. Chirping birds and the gusts of wind swaying the trees were the only noises to be heard other than our footsteps and ragged breathing. In this whole place of hundreds, maybe even thousands of people, only we two knew of the impending chaos that was about to occur. Close to a minute had passed since we'd started running. Above, the sun peeked through the dark clouds as if putting us in its spotlight. Any second now the world around us would descend into chaos, but when exactly that would happen was only known to the Gods.

As we ran, I thought of praying to them for protection. It was the only thing I could do to help, yet the words didn't come to me. I was willing to give my all to them if they'd simply grant us their favor this one time. As I struggled to think while running, I noticed Rosalia's pace begin to slow. Urging her to continue, I pulled her along despite my own growing fatigue. Every step was a small bit of distance between us and the impending explosion. As such, every moment was a blessing and we couldn't waste it. Despite this resolve, I suddenly felt my foot catch the root of a tree and I hit the ground harshly before rolling into a nearby ditch.

Rosalia quickly stopped to help me, but just as she did the ground shook in a manner I'd never experienced before. Jumping into the ditch herself, I pulled my friend close as we waited for whatever was about to come. There, huddled together, we held each other as time itself seemed to stop. Through my face covering, I could feel her rapid breaths as she panted. Her body shook, but I wasn't sure if this was due to the physical exertion we'd just put ourselves through, or if she was scared.

Just as I began to wonder when the explosion would happen, a force unlike anything I'd ever thought possible suddenly hit us. It was completely invisible, akin to a great and powerful wind, but it slammed into everything in its path like a crazed bear. We were spared the worst of it, due to our position in the ditch, however, branches and all manner of things from the canopy came crashing down all around us.

Just as I was about to get up and move to safety, Rosalia pulled me back down loudly shouting, "COVER YOUR EARS!"

Before I had the chance to react to her warning, an unearthly noise followed soon after as if a thousand trees fell at once. It was a deafening sound, not metaphorically, but rather literally as I found my hearing to be completely gone. All at once it felt as though I'd been punched in the gut and stabbed in the ears. It was an intense but short lived pain that soon gave way to a strange and loud whining noise. Trying to stand, I began to stumble as my balance felt off. I had a strong urge to vomit as though I'd eaten something foul. Taking deep breaths, my body shook as I tried to fight off this urge. Eventually, I found relief in having some of my hearing return, however, everything still sounded muffled.

Noticing Rosalia was still curled up, I stumbled over towards her, tumbling to the floor in my desperation as I tried to check on her. Shaking her by the shoulder, I was beyond grateful to see her eyes open and her body showing no obvious signs of injury. Unlike me, she'd been covering her ears and seemed to have fared much better. Before I could ask anything, she suddenly pointed to the sky, shouting something that I couldn't understand with my muffled hearing other than the word *fire*. As I looked upwards, and back to the way we'd come from, I suddenly saw the horrifying sight she was pointing to. It was as if a scene from the War of Damnation were playing right before my eyes. The sky was flooded with dark clouds that had completely blocked out the sun, forming a hellish red aura that replaced the once blue sky. Ash slowly fell from above as if it were snow, but soon my attention was turned to something else. Globes of flaming liquid began to pour forth from the ruined sky, igniting the forest below.

Despite my disorientation, I managed to stand and grabbed Rosalia's hand in order to urge her to run once more. I still had no destination in mind, but we simply had to run away from here in order to keep from being burned alive. Even with our growing fatigue, we sprinted with all we had, but no matter the distance we put between us and the explosion, the rain of fire still caught up with us. Trees near to us would suddenly burst into flames and we'd see our own deaths miss us by mere inches. With our back to the explosion, it was impossible to tell when one of these globes of fire would strike or if we were in its path. Blindly, we were running on faith alone that we'd be spared. Whatever else had been in that house, it was far more dangerous than anything she'd shown me.

Slowing our pace meant death and yet our bodies were beginning to reach their limit. Slowly they began to fail us as I could feel Rosalia's grasp weakening and my own legs beginning to buckle. I had basically been dragging Rosalia along for a while now, but it was becoming impossible to continue this.

I need to leave her behind if I want to live.

Absolutely not. I'm not going to abandon her.

It's painful.

My eyes, throat, legs... it all burns.

We're going to die.

There's only so far the spirit can push the body. The color is slowly draining from my vision and the edges are pulsing with every heartbeat. I'm going to collapse soon and die in this fire. There has to be somewhere we can take refuge. If only for a few minutes.

Almost as if a miracle manifested, we came upon a broken stone formation that possessed a nook large enough for us to squeeze into. There were no words necessary to convey what we both desperately wanted. In a way, it felt as though we were crawling into a coffin and yet there was no other choice. In the distance, I could see more fires begin to spread. We'd likely be surrounded soon, but for now there was enough distance where we could only feel a bit of the heat.

As we laid there, trying to catch our breath, I noticed that Rosalia was shaking again. Unlike before, the reason was now obvious. She was frightened to the point of no longer being able to control herself. I knew this because I was also terrified of what was happening. Leaning in closer, I rubbed her back in an effort to soothe her. In response to this, she latched onto me, squeezing tightly. Exhausted as I was, there was no discomfort in this.

"Don't be scared. It'll be alright. We'll make it out. I promise you." Between quick breaths, I managed to get out those bitter-tasting words. They were hollow lies and yet I had to say them because the truth was something neither of us wanted to hear said aloud.

"Captain... I'm sorry." Her voice wavered both out of fatigue and sheer sadness.

Now of all times, I wanted to show her kindness. To share a fraction of the affection and care she'd given me freely. Mimicking her past behavior, I wrapped my arms around her body and held her close. Her head tucked beneath my chin as she rested her cheek against my chest. The shaking of her body wasn't as intense as before, but I could tell that she was still fearful.

"It's alright." I softly said to her. "I don't blame you. I never wanted to admit it before, but our chances were never good anyway. Even so, I don't want to accept this fate. I want to keep trying. If we don't move, we're sure to die. I don't want that. I want to be free and happy alongside you, my friend."

I could feel her head nod as I continued to hold her. Seemingly out of nowhere, the words had finally come to me as to what I'd wanted to say to the Gods. Closing my eyes, I began to plead aloud with every ounce of faith I could muster.

I beg of you all, rulers of kings and queens, shapers of future and past, show us mercy

Do not let our dreams be swallowed by the darkness that surrounds us

Do not let the fires of our souls flicker away into nothing

Give us succor

Show us love

Being of little worth myself, I have nothing to give

Nothing worthy to offer to you who are masters of all

*Even so, I beg of you to show me a glimmer of your abundant generosity.
You who have made us and shaped us
Do not cast us into the cold darkness of death
And do not turn away as we suffer*

*Have mercy and guide us into the light of tomorrow
So that we may bask in the warmth of your holy sun.
Together, not apart, as you have brought us
Give us this chance to live in peace*

*I beg of you with every ounce of worth that I may possess
Lend us your aid in this time of need
And in exchange, even if you care little for it
I give to you my eternal soul*

I felt Rosalia let go and as I looked at her, I could tell she was ready to start running again. Squeezing out from the rocks, I could already feel the intense heat. The fire had begun to surround us, just as expected. Sparing no time, I grabbed her from behind and brought out my wings. Never had I tried to carry another person while flying and it was made apparent in how much I struggled to lift us from the ground. Even with how light she is, Soras aren't designed to do this. Despite this, I knew there was no other choice. With every ounce of strength I had left, I lifted us off the ground. I could feel the intense strain it put on my body until I was able to make it high enough for the winds to help me along. Into the sky we went, above the flames, even if unsteady, it was good enough to keep us alive.

Unlike flying regularly, I couldn't just use the air currents to help glide me through the air. It was a constant effort to keep us from plunging down below. I was tempted to land in the areas that hadn't burned yet, however, the smoke was thick enough that we'd risk suffocating if I did such a thing. Even from the air, or perhaps because I was in the air, the smoke was a constant issue. The ground beneath was lost to me and it was hard to tell how high I was actually flying. I coughed and gasped as I fought to breathe and what little air I managed to receive was expended on the task of keeping us airborne. I've put my body through too much strain, but I can't give in. If I do, my wings will dissipate and we'll both die.

"Captain!" Rosalia had suddenly cried out as she saw the pain it was causing me to keep us airborne. She seemed to be loosening her grip which caused me to reprimand her.

"Don't you dare! Squeeze tighter!" She seemed to refrain from whatever she was planning to do and dug her nails into my arms. Whether she was wearing gloves or not, I could feel the sharpness of

them even through my uniform. In a strange way, the sudden adrenaline from this pain woke me out of my fatigue if only for a moment.

I'd managed to get through the worst of it, but I felt our bodies becoming heavier and heavier. Sooner, rather than later, I'd have to land somewhere before we fell. The fact that my wings haven't vanished yet is a sign that the Gods must be with me. Even so, my spirit alone can't carry the two of us. Lower and lower we began to drop as my body failed me.

"Captain, don't give up!" Rosalia cried out, but it was no use.

I gave one last flap of my wings before I suddenly felt them melt away. Immediately after, we plunged down from the sky and into the canopy below. The branches of trees slammed into our bodies as we ragdolled to and fro in an agonizing manner. In a final attempt at protecting her, I tried to roll myself beneath Rosalia, but she slipped from my grasp as we were forced apart.

Almost immediately after, something struck my head before I slammed into the ground. I felt my breath leave me as the wind was knocked out of my lungs. With some panic, I gasped and felt nothing come in. Disorientated and in agony, I writhed around on the ground until the pain finally became manageable. For a moment, I thought I'd managed to break my ribs for the third time, but thankfully I was able to breathe once again without any sharp pain. I can't believe I survived that fall.

Where's Rosalia?

The thought immediately forced me to try and get to my feet, but my body simply refused to move. I was so exhausted, and in pain, that my arms collapsed beneath me when I tried to get up.

I can't do this anymore.

All I can do is pray that she's alright. As I am now, staying awake will be its own achievement.

Who will find me first if I pass out here?

"Captain!"

The unexpected voice brought a wave of relief as I saw Rosalia rushing over. Upon reaching me, she cradled my head in her arms while removing my hood. I'm not sure why she was doing this, but it's not as if I could stop her. She examined me for a moment before suddenly blowing air into my face which caused me to reflexively flinch. I suppose she was seeing if I was still responsive. Did I look that bad? With a sense of urgency, she grabbed me by the collar and began dragging me into a bush. It was only a short distance away, but she struggled quite a lot due to her fatigue. Once she hid me, she collapsed right next to me.

Whispering to her, I tried to ask if she was alright, but all I got out was, "Are you—" before she slapped my face on accident as she frantically tried to cover my mouth. Not knowing what was happening, I remained quiet. Despite the canopy being thick, I could make out the passing shadows of Soras flying overhead. Once they were gone, we stayed still for a while longer as more shadows continued to fly over us. I tried to count their numbers but gave up fairly quickly as my eyes began to close against my will. I was almost asleep before Rosalia shook me back awake.

“Hey, don’t close your eyes! I don’t think anymore are coming. Can you walk?”

“Do I have to?” I asked, not as a joke, but as a genuine question. The only thing I wanted was to sleep.

“Please don’t give up now, Captain! Just try a little more! Please!” She was on the verge of tears as she continued shaking me. Coming to my senses, I realized she was right. I’d come too far to give up here. With some effort, she managed to help me to my feet. Although I felt some terrible aches, I wasn’t injured enough to make me immobile. My main issue continued to be how drained my body was of energy.

“I’m sorry to burden you like this, but I need your help walking. The flying drained most of my strength.”

She didn’t complain and helped support me as we walked so that I wouldn’t fall. In the increasing darkness that we found ourselves in, I was very fortunate to have my friend along with me. Even had I been in good condition, I wouldn’t have been able to see much. Our pace was slow, but at the very least we seemed to be relatively safe according to her. Occasionally, we would need to duck for cover from a patrol, but the further we got the less frequent this became. I couldn’t tell if this was due to the fire needing more personnel to help put it out or if we had truly gotten that far away from the main chaos. Either way, I was simply glad to see less of them. As we continued on, I heard something in the distance that made me question if my hearing was still damaged from earlier.

Rushing water?

The river?

As far as I could tell, from the way we ran, we should have been far away from this river and yet as we moved closer I couldn’t deny what my eyes saw. The only way this could happen would be if we somehow looped around during our frantic running. This would mean we were still inside the Academy... Unless, of course, I somehow flew over the outer wall without knowing.

Seeing no recognizable landmarks anywhere in the distance, I began to wonder if the latter had actually happened. It was both anticlimactic yet an encouraging thought. So long had I cowered at the thought of crossing it, but now it had been done. It may not feel like it, but I’m a free man now. Perhaps if our situation weren’t so dire I could actually be happy about this. As far as I could tell, we had no supplies, weapons, water, knowledge of where we were going, and to top it off, we weren’t in good condition. Adding onto our own worries, the rest of our party is missing as well. I’m worried about what will happen when Rosalia realizes that she may never see her sister again.

“I’m thirsty...” Rosalia suddenly said aloud.

“Huh?” Quickly composing myself, I agreed. “It’d do us well to find water... Is it safe to be speaking like this?”

“I don’t hear anyone. I haven’t heard a thing in a while. We probably got far enough away at this point. Oh, by the way, take your hood back before I lose it.”

Thanking her, I masked my face once more. With no options to carry water, we watched the sky to make sure it was clear before scurrying towards the river and drinking as much as we could. The cool water seemed to revive me to an extent. Never before had I enjoyed water as much as I did at that moment.

Once we finished, we went back towards the more heavily forested area and began walking again. In the relative silence, I suddenly began to think about Maia. She'd put so much faith in me and yet she was likely still trapped inside of that place. Even worse, she could have been caught in the midst of the chaos and arrested... or killed.

A wave of guilt and sadness hit me as I realized I'd utterly failed her. Even if she survived, I doubt she'd ever want to see me again. Is this my fault or Rosalia's for not being careful? Despite my earlier words to her, I can't help but feel some resentment. She's done yet another incredibly selfish thing that's ruined my life... Then again, I shouldn't have given way to her excitement. Maia was right to chastise me that one night. I should have spoken my mind. So much could have been avoided if I had. As the older, and more experienced, one between us, the responsibility falls on me.

Rosalia and I spoke very little as we made our way through the forest. Not because of concern for our safety, but simply because we were too tired to do so. Occasionally we would stop to rest, taking miniature naps before one of us would startle ourselves awake and shake the other one. It was always very tempting to stay asleep, but we had to keep pushing each other to continue. By now it was hard to tell whether night had come or if this darkness was still due to the smoke. Looking above, I didn't see any signs of sunlight, *or* moonlight for that matter. It felt as though we were trapped in an endless abyss, but I suppose it's a good thing for those who want to stay hidden.

By now my feet were absolutely killing me. I couldn't help but ask whether or not she even had an idea of where to go. She'd been leading us, but as far as I knew she was just as lost as I was. "Are you heading in any specific direction or are we just going forward?"

"Unless you've got a better idea, I'm just gonna go straight until we reach something. The river isn't too far away so if we need water we can always head closer."

She seemed to be slightly annoyed at my question based on her tone. As far as I could tell, the river wasn't anywhere near, but that didn't mean she couldn't hear the rushing water that I couldn't. I suppose having a source of water is the most important thing aside from evading the Academy's patrols. Once we near winter, the river is likely to freeze again, but thankfully that was still a long way off. As for food...

My sling!

Lifting my jacket slightly, I felt the cord wrapped around my waist. How could I have forgotten about it? I'd unknowingly just increased our chances of survival by a good deal. When next we stopped at the river to drink, I began to gather the smooth stones that were nearby. Rosalia seemed confused until I explained what I was doing. Both of our spirits seemed lifted in knowing we had some means to

hunt and defend ourselves. Given time, and a better place, I could even craft another for my friend and teach her how to use it. Our mood only bettered when we eventually came across a path that looked as though it was once a well-traveled road. It was a bit overgrown from recent disuse, but it should lead to somewhere with shelter.

“Do you wanna follow this road?” She asked.

“It could be dangerous but—” A drop of rain suddenly hit my shoulder. It was ice cold. Slowly more drops began to fall as if to force the decision. “It seems we have no choice. Roads normally lead to buildings, don’t they?”

“They probably should.”

Although it was risky to be this close to a road, the wind was beginning to pick up and it would only be a matter of time before we’d be drenched. It wasn’t cold enough for us to freeze to death should we sleep outside, but if we were wet then it’d become a possibility. Knowing this, the two of us quickened our pace as we searched for shelter. Further along the path, the road split into two. One path was larger and seemed to be the main road, however, the interesting thing about the smaller route was that it lacked vegetation growing over it. Knowing the importance of this decision, I consulted Rosalia.

“Do you think it’s safe for me to scout for a moment? I’ll only be in the air for a few seconds at most. Do you hear anything?”

“No, but be careful.”

Taking to the sky, I scanned in the direction of the two paths. The main path seemed to continue going far beyond my vision, which was fairly limited from the lack of light; the other path, however, seemed to lead to something as I saw a silhouette of what appeared to be a building in the distance. Returning to Rosalia, I quickly shared the good news.

“There’s a building up ahead. Even if it’s not in good condition, we only need it to protect us from the rain for tonight. I’m sure there will be a dry spot we can squeeze into even if the roof is damaged.”

She nodded, and grabbed my hand. “Alright, let’s hurry before we get soaked.”

Right as she said that, the rain began to pick up. It wasn’t gradual either, and almost seemed to have been waiting for her to say that. Our walking soon turned into a messy jog as I tried to keep up with her. We could have been spotted with how open the path was, but then again, the rain was so heavy that it likely obscured us. Now that I thought about it, would anyone be left searching now that the rain was picking up? No amount of weapons or armor could protect you from the elements. The Academy would likely call off the search until conditions improved.

As we approached where I’d seen the silhouette of the building, I began to realize just what it was. From a distance it looked like a large house, but as we made our way closer it became apparent that this wasn’t the case. Despite its sorry state, it was clearly a chapel like the one in the Academy. It had

large windows that were stained in various colors, albeit most were cracked and a few were almost entirely gone with only a few pieces remaining. The greatest difference, however, was the way it was constructed. While the one in the Academy was made of stone and wood, this one was entirely made of fallen trees that hadn't even been stripped of their bark. Parts of it were a bit lopsided and the roof was nowhere near white and instead had moss and vines growing all over it. While I wasn't sure if this was due to it being abandoned, it somehow felt intentional. It was a church in the middle of the woods, and apart from the stained glass, it almost felt as though it was just another part of the forest.

"What a weird looking church. Let's hurry up and get inside!" Rosalia said aloud as she reached for the door's handle.

Just as she was about to touch it, the door suddenly flung open and a fully armored Toma covered in white holy symbols came forward. Pushing Rosalia aside, I untied my sling and was about to reach for a stone when the Toma suddenly grabbed my arm and called out with a familiar voice.

"Calm! It's me!" I almost couldn't believe what I was seeing. He didn't give us time to react as he quickly pulled me into the building with Rosalia following closely behind. Closing the door behind us, we were left in near total darkness.

"Where's Senga?" Rosalia immediately asked, not caring to know anything else.

Despite the sudden turn of luck, the pounding of my heart was keeping me from appreciating how fortunate this all was. I genuinely thought we were going to die for a moment. Were all the high ranking warriors that quick to react? He's astoundingly fast for how large he is. As I calmed myself, I heard the Toma answer Rosalia's question with some hesitation.

"Your sister, she... You must come see." Immediately, I began to fear the worst. Following behind them, we made our way to one of the benches where I spotted Senga lying there, taking quick, ragged breaths. Rosalia immediately rushed to her side, without a word uttered, the two embraced.

"What happened?" I asked the Toma.

"She fell behind and was attacked. Stabbed in stomach... She—"

He stopped himself from saying any more, seemingly worried that Rosalia would overhear. Instead he simply shook his head. As I looked at her lying on the bench, in such a weak state, I couldn't help but have my mind go back to that boy that was run through with the spear.

Was she going to die as well?

Ridding myself of this thought, I was reminded of Maia's healing abilities. "Where's Maia? Can't she help with this?"

"I... also was injured. Without me, none would survive." He admitted with a great deal of guilt in his voice. "Only one could be healed... I am so sorry."

He pointed over towards Maia who was sleeping, or more likely unconscious, due to the strain it put on her. I knew that nothing could be done now, but how could they have made that decision?

They're knowingly putting Rosalia's sister to death. Could nothing else have been attempted? Was she seen as lesser in comparison? As cold as she had been to me, this is simply too cruel of a fate.

Even not having been close to her, I can't help but feel an immense welling of pain and sadness at seeing her in such a state. We've been through so much in order to escape that place and yet even out here it feels as though our lives were still worth nothing in the grand scheme of things. It was enough to make me want to cry out in anger. In my prayers, I had never said a word for her. Was it perhaps my own fault as well? How selfish was I to never spare a thought for Rosalia's own sister?

Not wanting to add to Rosalia's issues, I watched from a distance. The young girl held tightly to her sister's arm, openly sobbing yet fighting against her grief in order to pour forth her love.

"Please don't die Sunny... Please don't. I... I love you." Rosalia placed her head atop her sister's chest as if to seek comfort one last time.

"I'm sorry... I never wanted to leave you alone." In turn, she rested her hand on Rosalia's head. Stroking her hair as tears began to leave her eyes. "Let me see your face." Rosalia obediently moved closer to Senga, allowing the dying girl's weak hand to caress her cheek. With her finger, she wiped away some of the tears that ran down Rosalia's face. "I love you... I always will." With great effort, Senga leaned forward and kissed her sister's forehead. "You're the sweetest person I've ever known, but people are cruel... The world is cruel. I'm scared of leaving you. Please be careful... From now on remember that I'll always be watching. Don't do anything I wouldn't want you to."

To my surprise she suddenly pointed to me, not expecting the sudden confrontation in her final moments, I pointed to myself as if to make sure that she was gesturing to me. She nodded and motioned for me to come over. Hurrying over for her sake, I awkwardly knelt down so that I was within speaking distance. Even from here, I could clearly smell her blood. It must have been overwhelming for poor Rosalia but she showed no hints of disgust. Instead her sobbing was so intense that she could barely breathe despite trying to keep silent.

"If I had my way, I'd never have to risk my Rose to someone like you... I don't want to leave her but... this life has always been terrible to me." As if snapping herself out of her thoughts she shook her head and looked right back at me. "It's too dangerous for her to be alone. You're the only other person who's ever tried to keep her safe. That's why even if I—Just promise me... that... that you'll take care of her."

Her reluctant passing of the torch was obvious, but knowing the pain she must be in, I didn't hesitate. "I will... I'll protect her with my life." My promise to her was fully genuine in every breath of my word.

Suddenly raising her voice, she looked me dead in the eye. "Don't you dare take advantage or hurt her in any way... If you do, I'll find some way to come back and ruin you. She's the only good thing that ever happened in my life. I love her more than anything in this world... Damn it! To leave her like this..." Her voice broke as she began crying. The stoic front she had put on finally collapsed. Not

letting herself give into despair, she wiped the tears from her eyes and refocused herself. Grabbing me with a surprising amount of strength, she gave me one last warning. “Don’t let her stare at the full moon. Shinrins act strange if they stare at them. Be especially careful during the *Bloodmoon*... Tie her up if you have to. Just keep her from going outside. Don’t let anyone else near her too! I hate that it has to be you, but... you’re the only one she trusts. Please... especially during that time, stay with her and keep her safe.”

“I-I will.” I said, grabbing her hand and gently pulling it away from my uniform. Unsure of what she was talking about, I decided to give her peace by at least remembering this strange warning. “I promise you, whatever it takes, I’ll always do it to keep her safe.”

“Good.” She said before motioning for me to come closer. With great effort she leaned upwards, whispering in my ear. “Get her away from those two. As soon as you can, find a chance to run away... Even if you have to run back to the East... Last resort, but you’ll find help there.”

Her messages were getting progressively cryptic. I would have thought the pain was making her thoughts muddled, but she seemed to be fully lucid as far as I could tell. I nodded in response to this final request as she turned her attention back to Rosalia. Not wanting to rob them of their last moments together, I got up and backed away, eventually finding a bench nearby to sit in.

The Toma had stayed with Maia, keeping his silence out of respect. Not long passed before I began to notice Rosalia’s sobbing growing louder. The two had been whispering back and forth to each other, but at this point I realized that Senga was no longer moving. Rosalia had cradled her top half in her arms as if to lift her off the bench, but instead she held her close, comforting the dead body. I’d never seen such an intense display of emotion before, nor did I ever want to see it again. My heart ached to see her lifeless body. I’d never known the grief of death until now. To have somebody mourn your passing in such a way. I’d always thought I’d wanted that, but now I saw how much it hurt those you left behind. I realized how ignorant I was.

Quietly coming up behind Rosalia, I kneeled down beside her and rubbed her back as she continued to sob. The pain she felt was so deep that she no longer made noise when she cried, it was simply a breathless shaking that caused me to worry. It took some time for her to calm down enough to breathe normally. Helping her, we laid Senga back down to rest in a more peaceful position. Looking at her face, it seemed as though she’d simply fallen asleep. It would have been believable if not for her blood drenched uniform and the stains on the bench.

Without warning, Rosalia suddenly wrapped her arms around me, burying her wet face into my chest. There was no affection in her action, but rather she sought comfort as she did during the fire. She trembled just as she did then as well, the grief now beginning to overwhelm her. Perhaps for the first time that she could remember, she was without Senga. Being the only other person she trusted, she clung onto me in order to not be alone in this world.

Just as I had done to comfort her before, I returned her embrace and held her closely. Nestling her head beneath mine, I rubbed her back as if to help coax out her anguish. The way that she continued to sob worried me. I wasn't sure how to help her. I could never bring back her sister and I could never remove the guilt she might feel in all of this.

All I could do was to continue holding her. To assure her that in all of this she would never be alone. It was all I could ever do. If she so desired, I would continue holding her until the sun arose and beyond that. For her, I would do anything to see her smile once more. My poor friend. It hurts me so much to see you like this...

Chapter XIV
Day Ends All Dreams

Once she'd cried herself to the point of exhaustion, I carried her over to a bench near the front of the church, far away from the body. I sat her next to me. Either from lack of strength, or still seeking comfort, she leaned her head on my shoulder as she finally fell asleep. With everything that happened, I could hardly keep my own eyes open. At times, they would droop down for a moment, but I would instantly feel a burst of adrenaline come to wake me. Reko had fallen asleep a while ago, likely due to his injuries still healing. I couldn't leave everyone unguarded, yet despite my efforts, there's only so much you can do to fight against your body. Without my consent, my body forced itself into sleep. Such a deep sleep it was as well as I was made completely unaware of the passage of time. Although it was still nighttime when I awoke, the rain had stopped and the chirping of a few birds signified the soon to come sunrise.

As I looked around, I noticed that the church was empty. I tried remaining still in order to not wake Rosalia, but I couldn't see any sign of Maia or Reko. Turning towards the back of the church, I noticed that Senga's body was no longer there. Had they gone to bury it? Although I hoped it was done out of good will, it could also simply be a way to help cover our tracks. I just hoped that Rosalia wouldn't react badly to this news given the fact that she wasn't present for the burial. Looking at her snoring peacefully, I asked the Gods a genuine question.

Why do this to her?

I should be grateful that we're even alive, but to survive at the loss of Senga made me feel bitter. Would it have been too much to ask for her sister to have lived as well? Although she was abrasive to anyone who wasn't Rosalia, she never did anything to deserve this. For what little it means, I forgive her for all the harsh words she said to me. In her final moments, I finally glimpsed the person she truly was. If only the three of us could have escaped together... What life could we have lived?

My thoughts were interrupted by the door creaking open. In walked Maia, who immediately noticed my stare. She didn't say a word and instead began packing some items that were on the floor. It looked as though they had managed to take some provisions. Would they be enough for the journey ahead? Aside from that, should I listen to the warning of Senga regarding them?

After everything that's happened, I don't know if things will ever be the same. The less memories we have of the Academy and its people, the better. I'm sure I can find somewhere that will accept us into their community. Even if I have to travel to the East, as Senga suggested. It's somewhat of a daunting task to take care of another person aside from myself, but for Rosalia's sake, I'll learn how to. Even if in the end there is no sanctuary for us, at the very least we'll be together.

My attention suddenly shifted to her as she'd begun to stir. In response, I stroked the back of her head which seemed to calm her. Whatever dreams she had, I hoped they were good ones. The poor

girl deserves some reprieve from this waking nightmare. As much as I wish I could do everything myself, I need her rested. Not just because I need her to keep up with me, but because I'll need her help as well.

As I continued stroking her hair, I began to feel rather soothed myself. These little actions gave me comfort in the idea that I was helping in some way. Ever since I've met her, I've felt this protective instinct awakening within me. It's not as if I'm that much older than her. It's just that... I suppose when I look at her sleeping face, I feel a warmth within me. When I think of her smile and kindness, I can't help but want to do all I can to protect it. She's a reckless troublemaker and she has her many faults, but at the end of the day she's also my precious friend.

Suddenly from somewhere outside a branch snapped. Rosalia's ears shot up and she instantly awoke, startled. "What is that?!"

"It may just be an animal, calm down." The whistle that we heard soon after froze us in place. I recognize that whistle... They're calling more over here. A Sora patrol had likely spotted the Toma. Soon there would be multiple squads coming in our direction.

Maia suddenly burst through the doors, yelling over to us. "Head southeast and don't stop until you reach the edge of the swamp. We'll split up for now. If either of us makes it there first, we'll wait three days. If by then we don't see each other, then I can only hope something good happened to either of us."

Maia ran out of the building and we followed soon after. Perhaps she was heading over to help Reko, or perhaps she was going to seek her own safety. My primary concern was Rosalia, yet I couldn't help but feel a pang of worry as I saw Maia run away from us. What are the real chances we'll be fortunate a second time?

As we ran out the door, I couldn't help but think about how quickly things were unraveling again. On the run, and with a vague idea of what direction we were heading, my primary concern was getting us to a place where we could hide. There's no way we'd be able to outrun Soras on the ground. We needed to wait out the patrols.

Rosalia led the way as it was still dark, but in the distance the faint orange glow of the sky showed to us that the sun was about to rise. With each footfall, my prayers to the Gods only grew more fervent, however, as I turned my head to the sky, the sight nearly brought me to my knees. Encircling us from a distance were small lights from lanterns. These were no longer just scouts. Overseers had likely arrived with search parties but hadn't spotted us yet. There was little chance we'd escape now that they were sweeping the forest. As Rosalia noticed my speed decreasing, she turned around and asked if I was too tired to continue.

"It's not that. I just don't understand... How did they know where to look? It just doesn't make sense. Of all the damned places we could have run, how did they know—"

“But shouldn’t we keep trying?” Grabbing my arm, she pulled me towards her. “We can’t just give up here!”

“Rosalia...”

“You promised me that we’d go live somewhere better! We shouldn’t just give up here! Don’t you want that?”

“I do, but—”

“You even promised Sunny that we’d take care of each other, right? You’re not going to break that promise, are you?”

“No, but Rosalia I just—”

She suddenly tackled me to the ground. At first I thought it was out of anger, however, as I looked up I saw her mouth hung open and her eyes wide from shock. Not a sound left her. A second later, she collapsed to the floor, gasping for air.

Looking up, I saw a Sora flying above, bow in hand. The Sora whistled before readying another arrow. Immediately, an unholy rage took over my body and I flew at him with reckless abandon. An animalistic screaming came from me without care of being discovered. My vision became clearer than it had ever been but the color seemed to leave me. The intense pumping of my blood deafened my ears as I saw the Sora let loose another arrow. The panic with which he shot caused him to miss me by mere inches. Before he could draw his dagger, I slammed into him, punching his cheek hard enough to hurt my own hand. I could see blood and a tooth fall from his mouth. As he tried to retreat I grabbed his collar and reached for my sling. Ripping it from my waist, I began striking him until I was able to wrap it tightly around his neck. All throughout the process his wings smacked me in the face as if it were his last defense left.

I pulled on both ends of the sling harder and harder until there came a sudden dull crack. At first I thought the material of the sling had given way, but upon seeing his wings dissipate and feeling the sudden weight of his body, I realized that I’d crushed his throat. Letting him fall towards the ground, I rushed back over to Rosalia. She was still alive but her skin was paler than usual. Her hand reached out to me and in response I took off my glove so that I could hold it properly. Her skin was becoming cold.

“Cap... tain... I—” She was struggling to breathe but desperately wanted to say something.

“Stop talking! I’ll provide aid. Save your strength.” I began ripping whatever portions of my uniform I could to staunch the flow of blood. The arrow was still stuck inside of her, I just couldn’t tell if it had fully pierced through. “Look, this might hurt but I need you to be strong, okay? Just stay with me!” I began to tear the back of her uniform open to check for an exit wound. Her pale skin was stained with large amounts of blood, but there was no exit from the back. The damn arrow hadn’t gone all the way through. I can’t snap it cleanly.

“Hurts!... It hurts!”

“I know! I know! This is the only way though, I’m sorry!” I placed my hand on the arrow which caused her to groan. My hands began to sweat profusely as I gripped the arrow tightly. I vaguely knew what to do. We’d never seen this done in person, we were just told about it. I had to take the arrow out and shove in some makeshift bandages to clog the opening. In my mind it made sense, but I couldn’t help hesitating.

STOP damn it! Stop these hands from shaking. I need to do this. She’ll die if I don’t help her.

She continued to groan as I readied myself to pull the arrow. “I’m pulling on three. One. Two.” I took a deep breath and gripped the arrow until my fingernails dug into my skin “Three!”

I could feel the resistance as the arrow came out. There was so much blood and the screaming of Rosalia only made it worse.

Should I have done this?

Did I just kill her?

My hands were shaking to the point of nearly being useless. I desperately tried to shove the makeshift bandages into the hole I’d created despite her trying to stop me. I felt as if I was hurting her more than anything and yet there was no other choice.

“I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry!” I continued begging for her forgiveness as I packed her wound as tight as possible. By now the blood had gotten all over my hands and continued to seep out despite my best efforts to plug the hole. As I continued, I began to notice that the blood was turning a lighter shade of red. It was too much blood loss. She was reaching a critical point and I couldn’t stop it.

Finally losing my composure, I cradled her in my arms and began weeping as I felt her blood soaking my pants. “Rosalia, please forgive me!” I could feel her weakly move her head, but no longer did she respond. I leaned closer in an attempt to hear her speak, but I soon noticed that I couldn’t even hear her breathing.

“Rosalia!” I called out, my throat tightening to the point where I struggled to force out the words. “Please say something!”

Her body slowly became limp and her eyes no longer opened. I struggled to take in air as I became unable to do anything but weep. My tears began making my face covering stick to me which infuriated me to the point of ripping off the entire thing. As I continued crying, my tears fell onto her face. The image was too painful, but I couldn’t stop looking at her in the hopes that she would awaken.

“I’m so sorry.” The useless words continued to come from me as I saw the distant lantern lights begin to close in on me. “Please... Don’t leave me alone here.” Hearing nothing but silence in response I rested her head against my chest, stroking the back of her head. I continued sobbing, holding her more tightly but knowing all the meanwhile that she would never hold me again. The pain was worse than anything I’d ever suffered. It was as if thorns were clawing at my insides. More whistles could be heard in the distance. Despite being surrounded, I knew my fate. I was going to die, *alone*.

Finally accepting this truth, I found my final words to my dear friend. “When next we meet... I promise I’ll never be cold to you ever again... I’ll return every one of your embraces. I’ll shower you with compliments and tell you what a wonderful person you are... My sweet friend... All I want is to see your beautiful smile again. I beg of you... please wait for me.”

I rested my cheek against her’s. The warmth of her soul was gone, replaced by the cold reality I found myself in. My little friend, I’m so sorry that I couldn’t protect you. I am nothing but a failure. In such little time, I’ve broken my promise.

“Why did you choose to die in my place? Did you... It seems you took my words to heart. I never meant for you to do something like this... It’s my fault.” Once more I heard a whistle, this time fairly close. Knowing my time was coming to an end, I felt some clarity. “I suppose I can take solace in knowing that you won’t have to go through this in my place. I’m more suited to die like this. If you’re still able to see me somehow, please don’t worry yourself over me. The pain that’s about to come pales in comparison to the pain of losing you. If death means we can be reunited, then I’m not scared of dying, I look forward to it. As for what’s to come, I’d rather you not see it. Please turn your head and wait for me with your sister... and please make sure she’s not too hard on me, okay?”

I gently laid her body down to rest. Her delicate sleeping face was like that of a doll’s. I would have liked to have given her a proper burial, but I was running short on time. Instead, I took what was left of my hood and covered her face.

“The next time we meet, I won’t hide my face from you. There are many things I’ll have to make up for.”

Getting up from the ground, I went over to the Sora to see what sort of weapons he had on him. From what I could see, he was well armed. A bow, dagger, and even a shortsword. He was surprisingly geared for a grunt. At least, this is what I thought until I saw his armband. An Overseer, no wonder. It explained his kit, but it didn’t explain why he wasn’t leading a squad like the others appeared to be. Had he acted on his own volition or had someone higher ranked ordered him to scout ahead? Whatever the case, he had succeeded in his mission.

I took his bow and quiver. Most of the arrows had fallen and scattered but a few remained. It didn’t matter much anyways. I likely wouldn’t have the time to go through what was left. The parties in the distance communicated with different whistles. One called “Over here!” while another responded “On my way!” Different tones, lengths, and counts would relay different messages. It was one of the things they taught us in order for Soras to communicate with each other and the slower Tomas who would provide the brunt of the force. There were likely to be dozens heading my way shortly, but one of the parties was ahead of the others, their light had begun peaking through the leaves of nearby foliage in the same way the sun’s light was now peaking over the mountains.

Taking one last look at Rosalia, I made sure she was in a safe place where she wouldn’t be seen. It didn’t matter anymore, but I couldn’t bear to see her body further desecrated. With a deep breath, I

tried to steady my hands. I couldn't tell if I was tired or scared. Even though I was ready to die, it was a strange feeling to be waiting for it like this. No part of me wanted to retreat and yet my hands shook. What a strange thing it is to die without ever really understanding myself. Slinging the quiver over my shoulder, I grabbed the sword and flew up into a nearby tree.

As I waited for them, I knelt on the sword to keep it in place and nocked an arrow, ready for the first chance to let it loose. My breath automatically stilled as though I were back to hunting animals. In some sense they were nothing more than that, unruly animals that needed to be put down. They don't know the pain they inflict. They just do as they're told. Most don't even have the luxury of living on instinct. Less than animals.

As soon as the frontmost party member came into view, I let go of the string. The arrow raced forward, carrying the hatred I had for all of these beasts along with it. It stuck into the front of the Sora's hood, coming out the back of his head at an odd angle. The shock of it led the others to instantly scatter. I couldn't see them clearly, but their silhouettes were enough for me to shoot at. As I let loose more arrows, I saw that two more had managed to hit their marks. Dull thuds could be heard in the distance as they crashed to the floor once their wings dissipated. Although I hit a third, it wasn't enough to down him and by then the last two of their five person squad had found my position. As I reached for another arrow, I realized that I had been mistaken. I suppose I really did manage to go through all of them.

Suddenly hearing the sound of a crossbow letting loose a bolt, I didn't have enough time to react before a bolt lodged itself into my left shoulder. I let out a cry of pain as I fell out of the tree, the sword nearly impaling me as it fell along with me. Grabbing the sword, I got to my feet, my wings emerging despite the pain. The others immediately gave chase as I leapt into the air.

Trying to scurry away, I began flying low to the ground and through the trees, sometimes crashing into smaller branches in my hasty retreat. The pain of the bolt was manageable, but I wasn't sure how long the adrenaline would dull the pain. If it got much worse, there'd be a chance I'd become flightless. Having put some distance between us, I hid behind a tree and readied the shortsword. Staying still, I closed my eyes to listen for any abnormal sounds of rushing wind. Steadying my ragged breath, I finally heard the sound I was looking for.

Catching him mid-air, I jumped out and lanced him from the side as he passed. The momentum sent us both crashing to the forest floor, however, I managed to scramble to my feet and pull out the blade just in time to block an attack from his partner who had been lagging behind. Although he was aggressive, his strikes were wild as he seemed panicked at seeing his other squadmates die. When he lunged forward to stab, I feigned a block before twisting at the last moment to slash his wrist, forcing him to drop his weapon. Immediately, he attempted to back away but I showed him no mercy. Raising my sword high, I would have cleaved his head cleanly in two had he not jerked away at the last second. Instead, I slashed his face, tearing through his nose and cheek. Crying out in pain, he

writhed on the floor as I saw his eyes stare at me in fear through the tear in his face covering. Although the wound wasn't fatal in itself, it was an ugly injury that was likely excruciating.

Despite my hatred of these people, I would have killed him out of mercy had it not been for the light of another lantern that had found me. More Soras came, and unlike before, even Tomas had begun to pour in. I tried desperately to fly away, but arrows began to rain down from multiple directions. In an instant, several pierced my body and the shock of it was too much for me to bear. My wings left me and I crashed to the ground, writhing in pain. Every time I moved my body, I could feel the wood of the arrows' shafts physically impeding my limbs from functioning properly.

No longer able to fight, I simply laid there, slowly bleeding out. A Toma walked into view, his armor decorated like that of a Champion's. In his hand was an unusual weapon, a large club. Without any words, he walked over until he stood there towering over my body. In the growing light of the morning sun, he fully eclipsed any light from touching me.

I wanted to shield myself, but in my attempt, I felt the shaft of the arrows rub against my bones, causing me to cry out in pain. All I could do was watch in horror as he lifted the hammer in one smooth motion. Shutting my eyes, I waited for it to slam down. For an incredibly brief moment, I felt my head jerk downwards as a sickening noise that sounded like crushed glass filled my head.

There was no pain or discomfort that came after, just a blackness as if you closed your eyes and could no longer open them...

Chapter XV
To Awaken from Suffering

It was strange that I felt no pain whatsoever. In an instant everything had ceased as though I'd fallen asleep and yet I was still conscious. I couldn't pinpoint when exactly it happened, but I simply became aware that I was no longer alive. My fear, the adrenaline, all of it is just gone. Is this really what death is like? I thought I'd feel peace but instead I just feel... *nothing*.

The strangest thing was that I could still sense my body, or rather almost like the shell of it. It almost reminded me of when we were hiding in bushes, surrounded by leaves. I was now surrounded by my own body, yet it seemed foreign and heavy. The oddest thing of all was that it almost felt as though someone were shaking me. At first it was gentle, but soon I felt myself violently rocking back and forth as if someone were trying desperately to get my attention. From the corner of my eye there came a brilliant white light and then, all at once, my vision was filled with a sight that felt unreal. Leaning over me was... Rosalia?

She looked just as I had remembered her. My friend's bright blue eyes stared back at me in confusion. She could tell she had my attention, but anytime I tried to say something, I simply couldn't form the words. The sight before me seemed impossible and yet I desperately wanted to ensure that it wouldn't escape me again. With my emotions overwhelming me, I quickly sat up and wrapped her in the tightest embrace that I could.

"Captain?!" She exclaimed in confusion as she froze.

"Rosalia!" I yelled, nearly crying once more from pure joy. "You truly—I don't understand what's happening but I'm so happy to see you!" I made her already messy hair even messier as I rubbed my hooded face against it as if trying to bury myself in her. Despite how happy I was at our reunion, she didn't seem to share in the sentiment. In fact, I noticed she wasn't returning my embrace.

"You feeling alright?"

I looked past her to see something that caused me great bewilderment. We were back in Maia's house.

"What is this?" I muttered beneath my breath as I looked around and realized that I hadn't imagined it. We were truly back in that same house. If we're dead, then why are we here? It doesn't match anything that I was led to believe. More than that, I'm starting to feel no different than I did when I was alive.

"You're starting to worry me, Captain." She freed herself from my embrace and looked at me with great concern. "It looked like you were having a bad dream, so I woke you up. You were screaming and... you kept calling my name."

As I stared into her eyes I had the feeling that something wasn't right. She didn't seem to have the slightest shred of understanding as to what I had gone through. I don't think she's the type of

person who would play a joke on me when I'm in this sort of state. She genuinely seems puzzled by my actions. None of this makes sense.

Am I going insane?

"You're telling me that it was just a dream?" She slowly nodded in response. By now she almost looked frightened, but I couldn't tell if it was out of concern or if she too feared my mental state. I should have dropped it, but I couldn't. I continued rambling as if to force it to make sense. "It felt so real... Can dreams really be like that? I know I don't have much experience, but... I can't help but shake the feeling that it was more than just that."

"Really? Why's that?"

"I'm not sure. It's just a feeling. The few times I've dreamt were nothing like that. To make it even stranger, I felt pain, a lot of it. Is that normal?"

"Geez, what sort of dreams are you having?"

"Horrible ones apparently... If that's what dreams are supposed to be like, then I almost wish for them to be absent again." Lacking any real explanation, I began to slowly accept that perhaps it was nothing but a horribly realistic nightmare. In the end, I simply cared that Rosalia and the others were alive and well. Feeling as though my frantic state was passing, I let her know the truth. "I dreamt something terrible had happened to you."

"I could guess from the screaming, but Captain..." She slowly reached underneath my hood and touched my cheek. "I'm fine, see? You can feel my hands, they're warm." As she let go of my cheek I reached out and grabbed her hand. Despite her assurances, I still didn't want to let go. She smiled but lightly chastised me for my strange behavior thus far. "You really worry too much, y'know? You're acting silly. I'll always be safe when I'm with you and when I feel sad you're always there to hold me and make me feel better. We'll always be together, right?"

The sweetness of her words made me blush, but I noticed that she didn't have much of a reaction on her face outside of a smile. She's being rather straightforward, isn't she? There's no hint of embarrassment on her face either... Actually, now that I think about it, have I held her outside of that dream? Perhaps she's referring to something else I don't remember?

Something doesn't feel right.

There was something different about Rosalia that I could feel but not put into words. Noticing that she was reaching for my hood again, I stopped her hand.

"What are you doing?"

"Let me see your face, please?"

It was a strange request, but I could no longer bring myself to refuse her. Even if what I saw wasn't real, it affected my feelings toward her. Maia has already seen my face quite a few times by now. If I willingly showed her, then it's only right that I should feel just as comfortable around my dear friend.

"Alright." I replied, removing it quickly in order to keep myself from hesitating. "Why exactly do you want to see my face?"

Despite my determination, I still had some trouble facing her. To remedy this, she reached out and gently forced me to look at her.

"Do I need a reason? I just like looking at you. Something wrong with that?"

"No... but you're not usually like this. You're almost acting like Maia."

"Am I? I think you're just grossly overthinking things as you often do, buddy." A mischievous look came to her face. "Oh! Or perhaps you've got something you don't want to tell me? Are you scared of me? Such a young girl scaring big ol' Captain?"

"I'm not scared..." My words drifted off as I stared back into her eyes. My instincts were telling me that despite everything I could see and feel, this wasn't Rosalia. It was the same sort of instinctual feeling as when I could sense a wild animal stalking me. A feeling of danger was sitting beneath a surface of understanding I was unable to peer through.

Is it possible this is someone else?

I'm allowing paranoia to lead me to strange thoughts and yet... it all feels so wrong. I can't ignore my instincts screaming this at me.

"Say Captain... You care about me, right?"

"Hm? Why are you asking?"

"Come now, you're supposed to say *yes* to those sorts of questions! Why are you trying to overthink things again?" She gave a playful pout as if to purposefully tug at my heart.

"A-Alright... Yes, I do care about you. You're my friend after all."

She smiled, suddenly embracing me and resting her head against my chest. "And you'd do anything for me, right?"

"Anything?" I repeated, confused and overwhelmed by what was happening. "What are you trying to get at?"

"Let's say something bad really did happen to me. What would it make you do? Would you cry for me? Would you *kill* for me? You'd do *anything* to save me, right?... You would, wouldn't you?"

"I—"

"Do you hate me?"

I looked down to see tears forming in her eyes. "Of course not!" I wrapped my arms around her and began stroking the back of her head. As I did the smell of blood began to fill the air and I felt a growing sense of dread. "You're not making any sense. Why would you ever say those things? You know that's not—"

I looked past her to the window outside and noticed that the trees were swaying in an odd way. One second they would be still, and the next they would fade into mid-sway as if someone were actively flipping a drawing back and forth. Above the trees, the sky was just as abnormal. There was a white

abyss slowly beginning to swallow everything it touched. The other window seemed to be further along in this process of erasure as almost everything in view had already been swallowed by this white void.

“What a troublesome boy.”

The words shook my body as though they were reverberating from my soul and out towards my limbs. The once tight embrace of Rosalia suddenly loosened as she fell limp in my arms. I screamed out in horror but my body no longer moved and my voice was trapped within me. All I could do was sit in horror as everything I deemed to be real a moment ago slowly faded away. Even Rosalia was swallowed by the void, and despite using all my willpower to try and reach out towards her, it was all for naught as soon I couldn't even see my outstretched arm. All at once my entire body felt lost to me, as though I'd been devoured and left as nothing but a pair of floating eyes.

The world around me became a pure nothingness of white so quickly that I couldn't perceive the transition. If I could blink, I would describe it as happening in such a timeframe, but I found that even that had been taken from me. In such a state, I began to wonder if the white in front of me was really there after all. Am I really seeing this, or is this what the true lack of anything looks like? The thought of this being a punishment suddenly entered my mind. After all, before dying I killed quite a number of people.

Was it a sin to have killed them?

Were they innocent?

Should I have simply allowed them to kill me?

But why would I be punished for defending myself? That doesn't seem right. I never wanted for any of this to happen. None of it was fair. Everything had been stacked against me from the beginning. How could I be punished for responding with anger when everything was taken from me over and over again?

The more I argued with myself, the more I grew frustrated and angry. In the unreal stillness of this place, a second and an eternity felt as though it could all pass at the same time. I wasn't sure how long passed between one thought and the next. Unlike when I fight and my mind becomes blank, so that I may focus, this was almost the opposite. My physicality was gone and all that was left was my mind. It ran without stopping, taking me on whatever tangents it was thinking of.

It almost reminds me of the way Rosalia would speak without end.

If we're both dead, then shouldn't she be here?

Where is she now?

I miss her...

"Rosalia..." The words left almost as a sob, echoing all around me, shocking me temporarily out of my sadness.

"Oh, what a beautiful sorrow you have."

The words were incredibly clear as though they were coming from inside of my head. They caressed my soul with every syllable. It terrified me.

“Do not cry out in despair, my little lamb. I’ve waited for you to recover from the shock of death and yet you seem to now fall into a pit of despair. You should rejoice instead for you are heard. Focus on my voice. Do not allow yourself to be weighed down. I wish to speak with you.”

It was the same voice from earlier that had shaken me to my core, but now that the intensity was gone, I suppose there was a strange soothingness to it. I suppose it also helped that the voice no longer emanated from within me but rather reverberated around me as if I were back inside the auditorium. Ignoring these changes and instead focusing, as it had told me, I could clearly make it out to be the voice of a woman. Even so, nobody was here. It was still just an endless white that surrounded me.

“Who am I speaking with?” I attempted to say, but no sound came out. A moment ago I cried out in anguish, but now my tongue and mouth seemed to have disappeared. Is she the one doing this to me?

“Calm yourself and focus on the perception of your physical form. It may be uniquely difficult given your circumstance, but do try as you need some manner of form to interact with me.”

Form?

Am I formless as I am now?

What would that even look like?

Calming my mind before it ran away from me again, I did as the voice said and tried my best to picture what I looked like to others. Although I’d seen my reflection in pools of water a handful of times, I can’t say I really remember how I looked. Nonetheless, I created in my mind a vague image of myself and suddenly colors began to burst forth.

First the sky came in, the most vibrant blue that I’d ever seen. Fluffy clouds, like giant pieces of cotton, hung in the sky lazily. They slowly drifted across, coming in various shapes and sizes; however, they weren’t numerous enough to block out the sun. Although I could only see a bit of its brilliance out of the corner of my vision, something seemed a bit off from how I remembered it. Before I could try to get a better look, the ground sprouted beneath me. Lush grass that was long enough to bury your hand in, but short enough to not hide things beneath, blanketed the ground as far as my eye could see. It was a beautiful field that seemed to go on forever, with rolling hills that rippled in the fresh breeze that had begun to blow, and what a comfortable breeze it was, the kind that brought cool air on hot summer days and chilled the sweat beneath your clothes.

In the far distance, mountains slowly erupted from the ground and were adorned with white caps of snow. As if the scenery was not already breathtaking enough, flowers began to dot the landscape. All manner of shapes and sizes, followed by a sweet aroma that brought a deep sense of peace to me. For a moment, nothing else came and I lied there simply content with what I could see. Then, abruptly, there came a shadow behind me that grew until it blocked most of the sun's light. It wasn't an imposing darkness, but nonetheless it confused me until its source finally manifested. Above me grew the branches of a giant shade tree. Although a bit of the scenery was now blocked, it provided enough comfort for me not to mind.

I'd enjoyed everything thus far, but the introduction of the tree finally showed me the reason why something seemed off when I'd looked at the sun. Paying more attention to the branches, I noticed that the whole thing was unnaturally smooth. I don't really know how to explain it, other than the usual gnarled look of the bark was missing. Perhaps it would be better to describe it as a painting of a tree that had been brought to life. It wasn't particularly detailed, in contrast to the sketches in Rosalia's book, but it seemed to capture the *essence* of a tree rather than its realistic detail. This entire landscape was like that. Not exactly like reality, but rather its beautiful idealized version in the form of a painting. Despite how little sense this all made, I found myself at peace with it. At least, that was until an animal snuck up behind me.

“Baaaa~”

The source of my scare was an odd little sheep that walked rather unnaturally. Perhaps *walk* is the wrong word to use as it didn't much walk but rather bounced from side to side as if it were filled with air. As it came closer, I realized that it was more akin to a stuffed toy sheep. Just as the tree was not a real tree, this was not a real sheep. It looked quite soft, and had all the basic anatomy of a regular sheep, but its eyes were made of buttons and its body seemed to be made of woolen cloth.

“Do you like sheep? I'm quite fond of them.”

Without thinking about the fact that I was without body but a moment ago, I sat up and turned around. What greeted me, startled me more than any of the other strange sights I'd seen thus far. Almost as if mocking me, I saw Rosalia once more, or rather, the person pretending to be her. This time she was sitting on top of a black and white blanket with intricate designs the likes of which I'd never seen before. They were of swirls that were angular along with what seemed like words that I couldn't understand. Apart from that there were little sheep on it as well. It was rather thin and unlike everything else I'd seen, it seemed more *real* somehow despite its very large size. On top of this blanket, there was a feast of food and drinks I couldn't identify. The sight of all of this at once caused me to freeze in place, which the girl found humorous.

“Oh come now, I shan't harm a hair on your head! Would you not care to join my little feast? I've prepared this all just for you.”

The person puppeting Rosalia's image had ceased any pretense of actually being her. Instead, she used her own voice and manner of speaking, which was very formal and a bit foreign due to her word choice and accent. It wasn't as thick as Reko's, and reminded me more of Senga's, but was noticeably different from either of theirs. For lack of better words, the stranger's accent was rather *playful* and had a sort of *cheeriness* that seemed inherent to it. Despite her more formal way of speaking, I felt rather at ease when listening to her. That being said, I had many questions; the first being why she was using Rosalia's image.

Although I felt some anger that she was disrespecting my friend by doing this, I calmed myself before saying or doing anything drastic. This person was very likely connected to the Gods in some way, be it messenger or something else. It was the only way any of this made sense. There must be a reason for all of this that I may simply not understand yet. Even so, I wouldn't be able to focus until I had an answer for this strange action.

"Why are you disguised as Rosalia?"

"Come and have a seat first. There's much for us to discuss and it won't do you any good to stand there the whole time now, will it? 'Tis all my favorites that I've prepared for you on this occasion, so I'm sure there's at least one thing you'll enjoy."

Despite my hesitation, she patiently waited for me without another word. If she were a human being, I would have continued my confrontation, however, this obviously wasn't the case. The aura that came from her couldn't be described as oppressive, but it was enough for me to be aware of it without even trying. Feeling somewhat pressured, I did as she asked and sat down opposite of her. Pleased by this, she motioned to the food. Although I could hardly identify any of the things before me, they seemed to be sweets of some sort along with savory items that included meat.

I felt no hunger, but my curiosity was still alive and well. It may not be a good idea to accept food and drink from such a strange person, but everything before me looked delicious. Also, from a sheer point of curiosity, I just had to see how the food of the dead compared to that of the living. Reaching down, I picked up something that resembled a pocket made of bread with meat and other fillings inside. Eating unknown meat wasn't exactly the best idea for my first try at this mystery feast, however, the smell and softness of the bread tempted me out of my reason. Taking a small bite, my mouth was immediately flooded with textures and spices that made me instantly crave more. I never knew that food could be this flavorful. Not only was the bread and meat soft to the point of almost falling apart from my tongue alone, but the vegetables put in here were tender as well.

When we ate our soup at the Academy, the toughness of the meat was always random. Some days it would be fairly tender and others it would be stringy and chewy. I always put it down to different parts of the animal being used, but maybe some of the cooks that were rotated in were simply unskilled. Our meat was always cut into chunks and didn't have much flavor as it was boiled. The vegetables as well were random and varied in quality, likely due to the seasons or what was available

from outside traders. Eating was never something that brought much joy to me outside of a few occasions, but now that I tasted this, I felt as though I could eat a dozen or more. My enjoyment of these things must have been apparent as I could hear the girl giggling at my reaction.

“You must try the tea as well!” She said rather excitedly, which was strangely fitting for her appearance. “I’ve always received much praise for it. If you loved the food, then I’m sure you’ll love it just as much, if not more!”

She picked up the small, white cup in front of her and pointed at me to do the same. The liquid inside was red and looked a bit like watered down blood to me. Normally, I would have hesitated more, but the food I’d just eaten lowered my guard. As I brought the delicate glass-like cup to my face, I caught a whiff of a pleasant aroma. It reminded me of a flower that grew in the Academy, but for some reason I couldn’t recall which one. Taking a small sip, I was caught off-guard by how hot the liquid was, but rather than burning me, it felt as though it were warming my very spirit.

It only lasted for a moment, but once the warmth left there remained a sweetness in my mouth that reminded me of honey. There was also an unexpected flowery scent that seemed to creep up from the back of my throat and all the way into my nose. The smell was strong enough to almost feel as though I were holding the flower in front of me.

“Well, what do you think?”

“It’s... very pleasant. I’ve never had anything like this. Thank you.”

The girl set down her cup and casually bit into a colorful piece of bread. She seemed to be in no rush as she leisurely ate and raised her cup once more to enjoy her *tea* as she called it. Following her lead, I found a similar looking sweet near to me and tried it. Once more I was enraptured by new tastes that put anything I had while I was living to shame. My much lauded bread with jam didn’t compare to whatever this was. Looking back at her, I saw the girl pick a circular sweet from a plate filled with them and proceed to dip it into her tea before eating it. Copying her, I placed the other half-eaten sweet down and reached for the kind she’d grabbed. It was far more firm, but as I dipped it into the tea it suddenly became moist and soft. In a way, it only seemed to enhance the flavor by joining the taste of both the beverage and the food. I tried the same thing with the softer bread from before, however, much to my embarrassment the thing broke under the weight of the tea it absorbed and fell into my cup. For a moment I wondered if I should fish it out, however, the girl suddenly addressed me once more.

“When first you came, I knew not if you’d be able to withstand all that happened. Such traumatic events can taint the soul in horrid ways, but you’re safe now. This lovely place you see is where I spend much of my time. ‘Tis the closest thing I’ve ever known to a home. My hope was that by bringing you here, you’d be able to find some peace. At least, enough for us to converse with one another. You’re so timid and well-mannered now, ‘tis hard to imagine you as the fiend who was slaughtering others moments before.”

“Ach!—Ehem...” I almost choked as I had been attempting to slyly swallow the bread stuck in my cup. It was unexpected and only caused my mind to flood with memories of my death. As horrible as it was to remember, the worst was the shame I felt in having such a gentle-seeming being bring up my violent actions.

“That wasn’t... I’m normally not like that at all. The circumstances were—” My first instinct was to try and excuse myself from what had happened, but I quickly stopped myself. What use was there in lying to someone like this? She seemed to know everything. Letting go of my defensiveness, I finally spoke truthfully. “I acted in anger and grief... It doesn’t excuse what happened, but never before had I felt such strong emotions. Even now, I’m still bothered by you using Rosalia’s image. If your goal was to mock and punish me for what I’d done then I would understand, but your sudden kindness is confusing... Are you trying to taunt me by pretending to be my dead friend? I don’t understand if this is a continuation of my punishment or not.”

There was a hint of surprise on her face that she quickly masked by putting her hand to her mouth as if thinking. After a brief moment, she finally responded.

“When first I saw your actions before death, I did feel as though you should be punished, even if just for a short while. I assure you, I only had the purest of intentions, but my methods... Well, they were quite the fierce disaster, weren’t they? I meant to chastise you for your actions, but you spared no time in seeing through my ruse. ‘Twas your own trauma that then manifested itself into my illusion and gave you such a fright. I lay the blame on you for ruining my plans, but I suppose there’s little point in crying over it now.” Taking a moment, she looked down at her hands, staring at the nails in particular with curiosity. “As for my appearance, I apologize. Truly, I never meant for this to continue antagonizing you in any way. I meant for it to soothe and help you come to terms with your death, but I understand now that it may have only made things worse. Even so, I’m still in need of a disguise. Whatever shall I do? Would this mayhap be better for you?”

She snapped her fingers and Rosalia’s hair darkened until it became completely black. Her ears and tail followed. I suppose it was better than completely copying her, but it wasn’t exactly what I had in mind. Once she was done, she looked at me as if expecting a reply, or perhaps even praise.

“I... suppose that’s better. I’m sorry for making you do this. It’s just that speaking to you when you look exactly like Rosalia was causing me discomfort for various reasons.”

“Don’t worry yourself on my behalf. Had I known in advance this would be your reaction, I would have chosen another one of your companions, or perhaps more sensible would have been a complete stranger to you.”

Her mistakes and admittance that she couldn’t peer into my thoughts challenged my beliefs in how I thought the divine functioned. Although she may or may not be a God, she had to have some manner of power as they do. Otherwise, how did any of this make sense? Still, does this mean the Gods can’t peer into my thoughts as well, or is she not as powerful as them? I doubt she’d reveal everything to

me, but at the very least I wanted to know the reason for this woman hiding her appearance. As soon as I asked this, a smile came upon her face as though she'd been waiting for this question. Calmly taking a sip of tea, she proceeded to indulge my curiosity.

"There's quite an important reason for this secrecy... and I believe you know it as well. Put plainly, what we're doing here, at this very moment, is forbidden. If it were to be discovered, the consequences would be dire for you and I. Knowing this, you must understand why I'll be keeping my identity a secret until I can be certain of your intentions."

"My intentions?"

She pointed to herself. "What would you do to save your friend?"

"Are the two of us not already dead? Unless you mean you can bring us back to life? Or are you suggesting that you can reunite me with her in the afterlife?"

"I see... You don't fully understand, do you?" The pity in her voice was apparent. "There's no eternal place for your soul to rest here. This place is meant for those who await loved ones that are still living. The souls of such people are allowed to rest here until they can be reunited and pass together. It also serves as a place where people can recover from the shock of death. There are other areas that may be closer to what you expected, but an eternal place for the souls of the dead there is not."

"Why not? If not an eternal home, then why can I not at least pass on with her? We died together so there's no need to even wait."

"Aye, your deaths did happen closely together, but so did many others. Many are dying and being born every moment. Among the sea of souls that await, would you say that your bond is strong enough to find one another?" Her question silenced me as I knew the answer, yet she continued.

"Family and lovers are often the only ones with strong enough bonds to be reunited after death. On the rare occasion, some friendships achieve this level of bond, however, do not delude yourself with this knowledge, my lamb. I know you may have grown attached to your friend, but if you fail to find her, then you'll eventually be *forced* to leave. Not by my doing, mind you, but by the force that brought you to this world in the first place. When that happens, there's scarce chance you'll ever see her again."

"I'm struggling to understand all of this... Is this not the afterlife then? I thought this was a sort of heaven as we were taught. Is it something else entirely?"

"Afterlife? Sure, this is the afterlife. Heaven? Not exactly. In all fairness to my home, 'tis quite a tranquil place to rest, but *only* to rest. Souls aren't meant to stay here for eternity and that's never been the case far as I know. To do such a thing, en masse as you were taught, would bring about trouble. This has been true since the beginning, and only more so now that the world has been fractured as it has. Like a dammed river, if too much water accumulates behind it, it'll eventually burst. In our case, the dam is cracked and barely keeping itself together... Perhaps I am saying too much and burdening you with things far beyond your comprehension. 'Tis best I stop myself lest I say something I shouldn't." She let out a sigh and stared off into the distance as she tried to figure out how to explain

this all to me. “Mayhap the importance of what I’m attempting to say is that you cannot stay here permanently. Should you attempt to search for your friend’s soul, I very much fear that you will fail. I hate to say such a thing to you, but ‘tis the truth as I see it. I shan’t impede you, should your will be to try, but please do listen to the rest of what I’ve to say before making a decision.”

Feeling a coldness within me for the first time since dying, it soon turned into a deep sense of sadness. “I’ll hear what you have to say, but I can’t hide how painful it is to hear it said aloud. To be brought to the afterlife and told I have nobody who cares for me as I do... It’s too cruel. Deep within me, I know it’s the truth... I suppose what I consider my entire life was only a fraction of everyone else’s wasn’t it? As short as all of our time together was, it meant far more than the rest of the *life* I had before... Quite pathetic, isn’t it?”

“My lamb, do not despair. What I’ve revealed thus far is but one option before you. There’s something else you must know.” The feast before us instantly vanished, and just as quickly, the girl came within arm’s reach of me. The blanket beneath us shrunk as if it had been cut in half and sewn together without me noticing. Taking my hand, she clasped it with both of hers. The warmth that emanated from this seemed to not only affect the part she touched, but my entire being. It felt nice enough to make me forget about my sadness for a moment, yet it quickly faded the instant she let go.

“I must admit that I’ve wronged you terribly. I’ve meddled with your fate as of late in order to ensure your death. Although I never wanted for you to go through such things, we could not have met any other way. My tampering had to be subtle in order for it to go unnoticed. Due to this, you survived many of my efforts and suffered all the more because of it... I’ve watched you with great interest for some time now. Your uncanny luck, and ability to survive dire circumstances, has only made me even more certain that you’re the one I’ve been searching for.”

Despite her praise, only one thing stuck in my mind. “You killed me?” Slowly, I crept back away from her. “Why? What was so important that you had to do this to me? And to also kill—”

“Should you choose it, I’ll send you back to a time before my tampering. Your meeting with that girl was not of my doing and whatever comes after will be as ‘twas always meant to be... Having said that, a similar fate may eventually befall you regardless of my absence. You know as well as I the dangers of the life you lived.”

“That’s true... What are my other options?”

“Aside from what I’ve mentioned thus far, there is one other choice offered to you. Truthfully, ‘tis the option that I’m hoping you’ll take and the reason I’ve put you through such suffering in the first place.” The wind suddenly ceased to blow and even the sheep became quiet. “I would like for you to enter a *covenant* with me. Keep in mind, should you agree to this, your fate will be permanently altered. I cannot promise that it’ll be for the better, but I can swear that I’ll reward you accordingly. In return for doing my will, I’ll bestow upon you a great power. A power that can protect those you cherish... should you be able to shoulder the burden that it brings, mind you.”

“What power are you offering me?”

With a pained expression she informed, “‘Tis unfair of me, but I cannot say unless the covenant is formed. If I were to tell, and you choose to reject me, you would remain with knowledge of my identity. This knowledge would only bring about mutual suffering. Although returning you should erase such memories in theory, you know better than I that certain things *linger*.”

It was quite the daunting decision to make with so little information. She didn’t seem deceitful, but just as with Maia, it’s hard to trust someone when they’re hiding so much from you. Before making my decision, there was something I wanted to know.

“You revealed that you had a hand in me dying. What exactly did you do to ensure that?”

“Ah... How I would like to hide this from you as well, but take it as a sign of trust that I reveal such a thing. ‘Tis shameful to admit, but I’d initially thought the best way to kill you would be alerting others of your position. The Toma at the ceremony for example, and once again with the Sora that found you eating the offerings. It works quite well with the faithful as they’re the most receptive. They *sense* my message as something rather miniscule, an unconscious idea or mayhap a visual oddity from the corner of their vision. In both cases you wouldn’t have been noticed under normal circumstances. When you think about it, you were rather elusive until recently, were you not? Wasn’t ‘til I’d become sure of my decision that you suddenly became a beacon of attention.”

“Couldn’t you have just killed me yourself? You’re... something like a God, am I correct?”

She gave a sweet smile as if to feign innocence. “I’m far more powerful than a mere mortal, but to call me a God? *Could* that be correct? What say you?”

Now, of all times, I wanted some clarity and yet her coyness only seemed to increase the more she seemed to grow comfortable speaking to me. As annoying as it was, it didn’t bother me to the same extent as when Maia toys with me. Avoiding her question as she did mine, I moved onto something else I wanted to know.

“What happened at the church... was that your doing as well?”

She seemed disappointed that I’d evaded her question, but didn’t linger on it, instead giving me a proper response..

“‘Twas not I that did such a thing to you. Hard as it may be to believe, the fire was my final act of desperation. Should you have survived the ordeal, I was planning to cease my meddling for both of our sakes.” As if sensing my sudden anger at how nonchalant she was, she suddenly began pleading her case. “I swear to you that such actions were never taken lightly! Keep in mind my previous explanation. Your death had to seem a natural occurrence given the dangerous situations you involve yourself in. Even so, you’ve a strange luck about you that’s hard to define as *good* or *bad*. Had you died in my initial attempts, much of your suffering could have been avoided. This not being the case, I was forced to lean more heavily on the scales of fate, and in doing so, the risk of being noticed grew with each attempt. The fire was my last resort and it caused far more destruction than I’d ever wished for. I was nearly

ready to write the whole thing off as a terrible failure until I saw the tragic beauty of how your life came to an end.”

“There was nothing *beautiful* about that.” I replied angrily, before reminding myself who I was speaking to and calming down. “If all you did was start the fire, then how did they find us so quickly? Was it something we did?”

“Agree to my offer and I’ll tell you. ‘Tis another thing I must keep close to my chest unless we are bound together.”

“Then allow me another question instead. Seeing as you can tamper with our world, could you not have just stopped my heart or killed me in some other somewhat natural way?”

She shook her head. “I don’t possess such power, and even if I did, such an action would be undeniable evidence of tampering with a mortal. There’d be not a chance to plead my innocence should anyone notice.”

“Then what about my dreams? Gods can speak to us in our dreams, can’t they?”

She motioned to the fields. “Look around you, does it not seem familiar?” As I looked at the rolling fields, the realization hit me that I’d seen this all before when I had that strange dream in Maia’s house. “There’s good reason for this. To put it in a way that you may understand, contacting a human through dreams is akin to shouting at someone across a field. The messages are not always interpreted correctly and at times it may simply be unheard or ignored. With you, however, ‘tis as if your ears are stuffed with cotton on top of the usual inconveniences. Although I have no way of knowing what exactly ‘tis that you saw, based on your actions, I could tell my various efforts were in vain.”

“I see...” Was all I could reply as I felt some embarrassment in knowing this was partly my fault. “I vaguely remember these fields and the feeling that someone was lying beside me. It’s as you said though, I never received any message.”

“I feared as much... but the blame needn’t lie on your shoulders. That *Academy* has delved into things that are an affront to life itself. What was done to you, and the rest of your members, wasn’t possible until the *Arcana* were born into this world. The red haired woman, Maia, is one of these people. They came into being not too long before the war and were a large contributor into why such an event occurred in the first place. You won’t find many of them and the few you do will likely not reveal themselves to you. I only inform you of this because of the perils associated with their very existence. In your case, an affliction has been placed upon your very soul, slowly eating away at the very core of your humanity. Should this curse be left to linger, you’d eventually begin to lose the unique qualities of your personality and experience various other effects, such as a dampening of emotion which may have already affected you to some extent. I needn’t explain more as you’ve seen it all firsthand. Before you fret, know that I’ve taken the liberty of removing it. Though you were ignorant of it when it occurred, you are now no longer, and I expect sincere gratitude.”

Quickly bowing my head, I put my hands together and offered my thanks to her. I suppose that was the reason she grabbed my hand earlier. With the way she laughed, it didn't seem as though she were entirely serious. When I looked back up at her, she seemed quite pleased.

"It fills me with great joy to see how polite you have been despite your troubles. You're quite the respectful one, even if you lack the knowledge of who you speak with... I know I've asked, but please indulge me. Who do you believe I am?"

Scared to give the wrong answer, I hesitated to say what was on my mind. It doesn't seem as if she can peer into my thoughts, but if I couldn't get away with lying to Maia, I have no chance here. In a situation like this, my heart would be pounding but there was nothing. Before my mind began to focus on how strange this was, I chose to re-focus myself on answering her question.

"Initially... I thought you were a God. With everything you did I was left in awe and didn't know what to make of all that was happening."

"And now?" She asked, visibly amused by my response thus far.

"You still strike me as a God, but it's strange to speak to you like this. It almost makes me wonder if you really are a God, but it's impossible to deny the power you have—I-I mean that in no disrespectful way of course!"

Laughing harder than before, she wiped a tear from her eye and brought me closer. Placing her hand on the top of my head, she rubbed it in both a playful and demeaning way. It was only now that I realized I had a hood covering my head and face. How had I been eating and drinking earlier?

"You're such a wonderfully strange boy! If for no other reason, I'd want to enter a pact with you simply for the amusement you'd bring me. It gets quite dull here at times. In fact, this is the first proper conversation I've had in quite a while."

"What about the other Gods?"

It looked as though she were about to answer my question when she suddenly stopped herself. "Trying to have me speak on things I shouldn't say? You thought I wouldn't notice the barb behind such an innocent question?" Putting her finger to my nose, she flicked it which was surprisingly painful. "Naughty boy, you're already well aware of my terms. You should cease such attempts. You're far too inexperienced to trick someone such as I and you wouldn't want to betray my trust either."

Although I'd asked it out of simple curiosity, I could see how it was badly interpreted. "I'm sorry." I said to her while at the same time somewhat surprised that I'd almost succeeded.

Placing her finger on my nose once more, I turned away slightly expecting to be hit again, but instead there came a warmth that reminded me of Maia's healing. It only lasted a moment, but the experience left me stunned.

"Truly, it would have been a pity had I given up on you. Had you not a strong will, the curse would've ruined you. 'Tis the only way you and the others haven't become like the, *Cogs*, as you call

them. Although to entirely scrub the humanity from a living person is impossible, they're still rendered to near beasts once it fully takes its toll. Do you happen to know what separates the two?"

"A beast and a human? I would think our intelligence, but is that tied to our soul?"

"Tis not entirely, there are quite intelligent creatures that exist, even if they may not be as clever as humans. That said, you are quite close in your assumption. Humanity has something called *reason* which allows them to make sense of the world in a way animals cannot. They are able to understand why things happen, change the world in order to better accommodate them, and conceive of a morality that impacts their very souls."

"Did the Gods not give us our morality? I was taught that the laws we were instructed to obey were divinely inspired."

"You reference that *book*, do you not?" Letting out a sigh, she shook her head. "Aye, the original was indeed a parting gift from a God, but which one I do not know. Divine as it may be, the various copies spread throughout by your order, and similar ones, contain several perversions of the original text. By now, to know what the original was meant to be is nigh impossible. As such, you should view such teachings with skepticism... but then I suppose I'm enforcing my own beliefs upon you, am I not? The Gods have never dictated a universal morality, nor were they meant to. Every human soul has a spark of the divine that guides it. In other words, the morality of humans is akin to that of the Gods themselves. Just as humanity could never be of one mind, neither were the Gods."

"But aren't certain actions inherently wrong? Murder, for example. Although I killed others in self-defense, I still feel some guilt over it."

"That is due to your kind soul, my lamb. 'Tis partly why I chose you. For you, murder, even in defense of your life, weighs heavily upon you. Will this always be the case? I cannot say. For others, such as warriors, their path becomes so bloody that killing begins to lose its significance to them. Naturally, they would align themselves with Gods who shared their mindset. For example, the God that many warriors in the past worshipped viewed death in battle as a glorious thing. In contrast, cowardice and underhanded tactics were seen as sinful behavior. Dishonor for them was akin to sin, however noble they were not. They tolerated atrocities aimed at civilians in the belief that to supply a sword was tantamount to swinging it."

"I see the logic to some extent... but it also seems rather twisted."

"No God can be described as a pure malevolent force and at times war is necessary... Having said that, I agree and 'tis why I have faith that you will never become like them. Rather interestingly, I've come across many warriors who regret their actions later in life. The guilt begins to consume them and their souls become quite tainted should they not find a way to assuage themselves of their sins. The interesting aspect of a person's morality is that it cannot be fooled. One may chant words, sing hymns, and mirror ideas, but many a time they are superficial. Certain things, such as murder, do seem to be a universal sin, but the degree of its stain on one's soul seems to vary based on the individual. Even the

influence of a God does not change this... But, look at me prattling on and on. I was meant to ask you to identify the other aspect that separates man from beast. Can you guess what this is?”

After everything she'd just said, I was unprepared to answer. I was taking quite a while to respond, but she didn't seem to want to rush me. I understood *reason* being special to humans, but what else separated me from an animal? As I thought back on my life, or at least what I remembered of it, I felt as though there were many things I could say, and yet none seemed right. Just as I was about to give up and ask her for the answer, I suddenly remembered why we were even having this conversation in the first place.

“Our attachments to one another? It's the only other thing I could think of, but are animals incapable of forming such attachments? They still have offspring and form pairs. I also see several travelling together at times.”

The girl nodded in approval and began correcting my answer. “Animals form attachments, aye. They form families, play with one another, and produce children as you have noticed. While you have a good deal of reason within you, your circumstances have made you unaware of the second aspect of humanity until recently. That is *love*. Unlike base attachment needed to produce offspring, love is something that is unique to humans. It goes beyond the physical into the very soul. Its bonds continue even beyond death. ‘Tis why these sheep—” She quickly put her hand to her mouth.

Although I quickly glanced at one of the sheep out of curiosity, I dismissed any idea of asking her to elaborate and moved onto an obvious question I had. “What is love?”

“That's... a fairly difficult thing to answer. ‘Tis akin to explaining what the sun is to someone who has lived in a cave their entire existence, or speaking of thirst to a fish. Regardless of my failure to explain, I need not as you've already experienced it firsthand. Do you not have great care for your friend? Did it not greatly pain you to see her death? Even that woman who treats you quite roughly at times, you seemed to care deeply for her as well. Friendship is a form of love, and one that can become quite deep and powerful. There are other forms as well, but it would be better for you to experience it than for me to simply tell you.”

“How exactly do I experience the other kinds? It's all a bit confusing.”

“Aye, you're still quite young. You've your whole life ahead of you to find out... At least, as long as you accept my offer. Mayhap this may entice you more?”

Her constant attempts to have me accept her covenant were beginning to sound a bit desperate. Even so, the more I've interacted with her, the less hesitation I've felt. Although I had considered the covenant from the start, simply due to being able to save our lives, I now felt less apprehensive about serving this God. Whichever one she was, she seemed to be a kind and caring one. Even without accepting her covenant, she had taught me much and eased my fears. As strange as it was, I've also started to enjoy speaking with her. There was only one more thing I wanted to know before deciding.

“Should I accept this covenant, will you also lift the curse from my companions?”

“I’ve no need to do such a thing. The curse is something that needs to be maintained as the soul actively tries to rid itself of it. Given time, your companions will naturally cure themselves. Would you like to know something interesting? Every time you were taken to that chapel, the curse was reapplied to each individual while your eyes were closed in prayer. ‘Tis a sick perversion of prayer, but it proved the perfect distraction.”

The revelation shocked me, but it made a lot of sense considering how I felt after praying at the chapel. All this time I thought it was because the Gods had heard me and lifted my spirit. Now, I realize it was all trickery... Although considering I’m speaking to the divine, I suppose it wasn’t entirely deceitful.

Suddenly clapping her hands, the sky shifted from a bright blue to a warm orange. In the distance, the sun began to set below the horizon. Seeing it clearly now, I saw that it was painted just as the tree was. It was beautiful in a strange way, and unlike our sun, it didn’t hurt to look at it directly.

“Now, we’ve spoken for some time and I’ve told you much, but now comes the time to make a decision as I wish to reveal no more to you. As said before, I do not intend to twist your arm. Should you decline my offer, you’ll simply live your life as destined to be before my intervention, or pass on if you wish. I shan’t hold anything against you; however, if I may offer my own input, should you truly wish to save your friends and strive towards that freedom you so wish for, then quite ironically, your best path forward would be to swap one master for another. Perhaps being *free* isn’t the correct word, but take solace in knowing that I will be a kind master. Your happiness and well-being will always be a concern for me.”

Perhaps it was because of her disguise as Rosalia that I felt some sense of safety with her. Until now, I often wondered if the Gods ever really heard my prayers. Whether she is a God, a messenger, or something else entirely, she’s come to me in a time of need with an offer I couldn’t refuse. Staring into the setting sun, the meaning of it all was not lost on me. Just as the day here was ending, so was my life. Even should I return, nothing will ever be the same.

I’ve never been one to jump into such unknowns willingly, but in this instance I never truly saw another way. If for no other reason, I do this to honor the sacrifices that were made because of me. Placing my very soul in this unknown God’s hands, I am entrusting her with everything. May I never look back on this decision with regret.

“I accept.”

“Pardon?” The girl seemed rather surprised. “Are you certain you don’t wish to take a bit longer? This is a rather important decision.”

“I don’t want to abandon my friends. Rosalia gave her life to try and save mine and Maia might be killed for my failure as well. If I chose to be sent back, and a similar fate awaited us down the line, I’d never forgive myself. You spoke of *sin* and *morality* earlier. To me, abandoning them because of my

own fears would be one of the worst sins I could commit. Once more, I will say it clearly, I accept your covenant.”

Delight spread across her face as she stood up. Reaching down towards me, she extended her hand. Hesitantly I reached out towards her. Upon doing so, she delicately placed one hand below and another on top of mine, sealing it inside.

“If truly you swear to serve and to entrust me with your soul, then let this gesture of trust be the marking of our union.” As she clasped my hand tighter, a strong light suddenly burst forth and forced me to look away. “Upon my title as *Shepherdess of the Dead*, I swear to you that my intentions are pure and my kindness sincere. Ever will I strive for your happiness so long as you strive to fulfill my will. From this moment, until the day your duty is fulfilled, your soul shall be in my care. I bid you now, rise and gaze upon your master’s true form.”

As I rose to my feet, the light was still there, but it was no longer blinding. Instead it masked her appearance in a soft glow that hid her features. Gradually, the luminous veil began to fade away and what was left caught me by surprise. With such a title, I was worried of the potential horrors that might await, however, what stood before me shocked me in a much more pleasant manner.

Dressed in a long hooded, black robe there stood a girl who appeared to be around the same age as Senga. Her eyes were of a bright silver, and despite her youthful appearance, there was an air of maturity and wisdom that surrounded her. At first, she looked at me with a rather serious expression which was in stark contrast to how she presented herself while disguised as Rosalia. Perhaps noticing how anxious I was, she dropped her serious demeanor and let out a friendly smile as if to assure me that this was her genuine self.

By now I should have made a comment, but I couldn’t help but stare. She had a very unique appearance, the likes of which drew my eyes to the rest of her. Much like her robe, her hair was a similar shade of black, the likes of which reminded me of the night sky on a moonless night. Despite it being braided into two large separated lengths, it was done rather loosely. Around her face and to her shoulders her hair was completely free. The middle and ends, however, were braided and tied with white ribbons that were somehow producing a soft glow of their own. It was the first time I’d ever seen such long hair as it not only flowed out of her hood like twin rivers, but seemed to almost reach down to where her knees should be. All of this, combined with the lovely features of her face, made her seemingly reflect the idyllic world that she’d created.

I never knew what a God would look like, but she exceeded anything I had in mind. The perfection of her appearance was both calming and intimidating as it was simply impossible to compare her to anyone else. Suddenly, I was beginning to feel thankful that I ended up serving her out of the holy twelve.

Still, one thing confused me. Despite her stunning beauty, her style of dress was fairly modest. I expected something more elegant and perhaps for there to be ornate decorations on her body. Instead,

something that almost reminded me of my uniform adorned her. I can't say it was nearly as plain, given that she had some decorations such as a rope belt with little tassels and an intricate design that went down the middle of her robe, but there wasn't much there that I felt someone like her should have. In fact, even the lantern that clung to her belt wasn't nearly as nice as the one Maia had.

"Although I asked you to gaze upon me, you're taking much longer than anticipated. Do I appear strange to you in some way?"

"N-No, not at all!" I found myself hurriedly replying in an effort to dismiss any potential offense. "I was just surprised. I wasn't sure what to expect but... Well, there's much about you that is stunning to someone like me."

She seemed to genuinely enjoy the compliment and soon spun herself around. "And my dress? What are your thoughts?"

"It's... quite a modest outfit for a Goddess such as yourself—Not that I dislike it, but I've always pictured the Gods wearing more lavish outfits."

"Well, I did make it for myself. Since my duty is to guide the souls of the dead into the afterlife, I figured that the role of a shepherdess would suit me quite well, was I not right?"

"The role does suit you." I replied, both in the hope that my agreeing with her would make her happy, but also because she genuinely did fit the role. "The glowing ribbons are quite interesting as well and those symbols... Do they mean anything? Or are they perhaps associated with your followers like the cog is with the Academy?"

"You are the only one who could even be considered a follower, my dear servant. These symbols are simply a design I like the appearance of."

"No followers? Is this due to what happened? Or do the Gods not consider the faithful followers unless they pray to them directly? If I had known about you before—"

"It seems you're creating your own misunderstanding. Did I ever refer to myself as a *God* a single time during this meeting? I've said it once, but I'll say it once more for your sake. I am the *Shepherdess of the Dead*. To put it plainly, I am not a God."

"Not a God? If not... but then—"

"But then you needn't worry. You've sworn yourself to me and although I am not a God, I am still powerful in my own right. I'll explain this all to you once you've proven yourself reliable, but for now 'tis time to fulfill my promise to you. Lend me your hand once more."

I did as she asked, placing my hand in hers. Gently, she led it towards her, placing it against her chest. Instead of feeling a heartbeat, I felt a powerful shock run through my body as though I'd been hit by lightning. It wasn't painful, but the feeling was overwhelming and nearly made me fall to the floor. Realizing that the Goddess herself had kept me from falling, I felt great embarrassment to make her do such a thing. Once she let go of me, the tingling sensation still remained throughout my body.

"What was that? Was that the power you promised me?"

“My apologies, I couldn’t help myself!” The girl began laughing which only furthered my confusion. “In truth, I only did that to liven an otherwise plain moment. When you swore yourself to me, and I to you, our joined hands and spoken words marked the start of our covenant. At that moment you obtained my gift.”

“Is that so? Well... you could have at least been more gentle with your trick.”

“Mayhap I went a bit too far?” She joined her hands together and smiled sweetly at me as if to convince me of her innocence. “Moving onto my *gift*, ‘tis important that you listen well. Please do not take any of this lightly as I swear to you none of this is a jest or stretching of the truth.” Clearing her throat, her demeanor changed and she looked at me with a serious expression on her face. “I’ve listened to your prayers for some time. ‘Tis clear to me how much you care, not only for your life, but the life of those around you. You wished for a way to save your dear friends, so I have given this power to you. I am no God, however, and my gift comes at a great cost. Come with me so that I may show you what I mean.”

Heading toward a flock of sheep, I noticed that their wool was of different colors. Most were white, with a few black spots, but there were also some gray and a few that were a slightly darker shade. As the Shepherdess came towards them, she clapped her hands and soon all within the vicinity flocked over towards her. As silly as they appeared, being nothing but toys in appearance, I soon realized what they truly were as she placed her hand on the head of one. With a bright flash, the sheep’s form disappeared and in its place was a glowing white orb with small blobs of black inside of it.

“Do not be frightened, come hither.” The Shepherdess gently said as she beckoned to me. “What you see here is the soul of a person who lived a good life. It shines brilliantly and has only a bit of blackening which is to be expected, especially in times like these. All souls come into this world the same way, shining brilliantly and as pure as snow. ‘Tis only through trauma, sorrow, and sinful actions that it becomes tainted as you see here. Even so, the taint is minor and ‘tis expected that every soul will eventually carry some of it.” Carefully covering it with her hands, the soul shone brightly once more and went back to the appearance of a sheep. “All of these souls are in a sleep of sorts. They are awaiting those who still yet live. Allow me to show you the opposite end of the spectrum, or as close as I can.”

She went to the sheep with the darkest wool. As it transformed, the light it gave off was noticeably dimmer. The soul itself was wrapped in a miasma of darkness, but enough light shone through to keep it from entirely being engulfed. Even without her saying a word, I sensed a deep sadness in this one.

“This soul was of a hired blade who killed many and lived a rather sinful life until he took pity on a young babe who he orphaned. Feeling immense guilt, he raised the child as his own and tried to atone for his past. Be that as it may, he was never able to raise the child to adulthood as he died during a bandit raid. The child is still alive, however, the man died with many regrets which is why his soul is so blackened. He is on the very edge of what can be kept within this realm.”

“Is that why there are no black sheep?”

“Yes, you’re correct to infer that. Blackened souls must be sent away from here. Their sin and attachments to the living world will only bring about ruin.”

“There’s nothing you can do about it?”

Nodding, she returned the soul back into its sheep form. “Not only because I am not a God, but because not even the Gods themselves can manipulate a soul in such a way. This is why I must give you this warning. The gift that I have given to you is one of knowledge. It will come at great cost to you. Upon death, you will be brought back to a moment beyond your control, but this placement will serve as a point where you can change your fate. You will learn from your greatest mistakes and have the chance to avoid them... However, as you see, such traumas and sorrow will taint your soul. Despite being effectively immortal, there will come a point where your soul may be beyond saving. At such a point, I will be forced to remove you from this world. Do you understand?”

“I understand... At the same time though, I’m struggling to grasp it all at once. How will I know when I’m starting to become *beyond saving*? Also, wouldn’t it be better for you to simply guide me? You’d be able to do a better job than I could.”

“What I’ve done, and what I will continue to do for you, is against the will of the Gods. Since the war, interaction with mortals has been forbidden. Were we to be discovered, there would be consequences for every living being in existence. This is why we must operate in secrecy. I cannot offer you more than what I’ve given. You, as well, must do your part and keep our covenant a secret. All that you know and do must seem natural from an observer’s viewpoint. That means regardless of what happens, you mustn’t reveal this to anyone, even your closest companions. With the Gods potentially watching, even the most quiet whisper could be heard, and this includes prayer.”

“I understand...”

“Do not be so fearful, my servant. This is but the start of a wonderful new life for the both of us. Just as you strive to serve my will, I’ll always strive for your happiness and safety. If ever I believed you incapable of this task, this conversation would not have happened. Take pride in that I’ve chosen you above all others. From now, until forever, you will always be my most cherished lamb.”

“Thank you?”

“I’ve quite the liking for these adorable creatures, so my compliment is rather heartfelt. Even if my gift becomes akin to a curse at times, and the obstacles before you seem insurmountable, I know that the brilliance of your soul will shine through eventually for you are loved more than you know, my precious lamb.”

I said nothing in return as we simply returned to looking out over the fields. In the distance sheep bopped to and fro. It was a bittersweet scene to see so many of them frolicking in such a place. Some of them huddled together and some wandered off by themselves. Did this girl simply spend her time here tending to these sheep all day? How does time pass for someone like her? Although I felt

great concern over my own fate, I couldn't help but have some pity for her. I'm the first person she's spoken to in a long time. This means the sheep are her only company most of the time.

"When next you wake, everything will be as 'twas before. For now, I ask nothing more than for you to keep our secret... and to take care of yourself."

I bowed my head in response. "Thank you... for everything." Suddenly remembering the lesson Maia had taught me, I humbly asked, "May I know your name?"

"Ah!" She suddenly said aloud in surprise. "I've forced you to assume as to how I must be addressed! What a silly mistake. Let me see..." She tapped her chin, apparently she hadn't thought of this beforehand. Seeing this, I could assume that she wasn't going to give me her actual name. Then again, it was possible that she didn't have one similar to a mortal like me. Either way, it wasn't long until she gave me a short list of acceptable ways to address her. "You may call me *Shepherdess*, *Master*, *My Lady*, or even *Goddess*."

"Goddess?" I repeated. "I thought you weren't a God. Is it alright for me to call you that?"

"'Tis true that I'm not one of the original twelve, but so long as it stays between us there is no harm in it, no? As my loyal servant, it would do you well to flatter me. Now come, I must bid you farewell." Putting her hand atop my head, she pushed me down with a surprising amount of strength, forcing me to kneel. Shifting her hand to my forehead, she then gave her final words to me. "I know that there is much you've yet to understand, but we will have time in the future to learn from one another. As you return to your world, remember that I will always be watching. Pray to the Gods, not to me specifically, should you ever want to be heard. Please, take heed of my warnings and above all else, do not make me regret this decision. Until next we meet, *my little lamb*..."

Her final words echoed as everything quickly faded away into the blank nothingness of endless white. Although I wasn't as shocked as the first time, it was still disconcerting to experience. Thankfully, it didn't take long before I could see color returning from the edge of my vision. Slowly, it began to fill in and soon the mess of colors began shaping the vague image of Maia's ceiling. Blinking away the remaining blurriness, I felt the weight of my body as I lifted my head to see a comforting sight. True to her word, I was reunited with my friend, who was peacefully snoring at my feet. It wasn't exactly what I expected, given that her previous meddling hadn't been undone, but at this point I didn't care.

Unable to contain my feelings, I leapt towards her, wrapping her in a tight embrace. I rubbed my hooded face against the top of her head as she awoke rather startled. Even so, I didn't stop, even as she let out a frightened cry. Soon, I'd have to explain my inappropriate behavior, but for the time being, I just wanted to hold my beloved friend and know that she was alive and well.

Chapter XV

Faith Renewed

I'm not fond of doing things in the heat of the moment. If asked, I would say that I'm a fairly calm person. If anything, I would say that my issue is that I take *too* long to act at times. I suppose my recent actions don't reflect that, but... What I'm trying to get at is that I'm not the kind of person that would normally get myself into this kind of situation.

Did I know it was a bad idea to jump on Rosalia like that? Of course I did. I knew it was bad and yet I did it anyway. I failed to control myself. I was so happy to see her that I threw caution to the wind and gave into my overflowing emotions. Do I regret it? Partially.

As bad of an idea as this was, I can't help the way I feel. Even so, I should have spared more thought as to what my friend would think. She doesn't have the same memories that I do. She doesn't remember how I held her through the night as she mourned the loss of her friend, nor does she remember the sacrifice she made in order to try and save my life. My friend is still the same wonderful person she has always been, however, she's clueless as to what I've been through. For her, nothing has changed.

Today was just as normal as it had been the day before for everyone in this world. I was the only thing out of place. Secret as it all was, not even the Gods were aware. How this was possible, I can't even begin to fathom. This brief glimpse into the world of the divine has left me permanently changed and with so many questions. To my shame, behaving in such a way upon seeing Rosalia was already a failure on my part. It was a stupid and selfish act and she was right to react the way she did. Even so, if given a million more chances, I likely would have still reacted the same way every time. How could I not?

"Geez, you're such a baby. I can't believe you got so worked up over a silly nightmare... It doesn't hurt too much, does it?"

Despite her initial shock, she didn't seem to be angry. If anything, she seemed to enjoy poking fun at me for my perceived overreaction to a nightmare. It was a relief to not see her angry, but I still felt embarrassed for scaring her like that. From her point of view, I've never acted like this until now. I can't exactly lay any blame on her for smacking me as hard as she did.

Although she'd been wearing gloves, the girl had struck me with such force that one of her nails managed to tear through and slice my cheek. It's impressive that it not only cut through leather, but the fabric of my hood, and the skin of my cheek. Thankfully, it wasn't a deep wound, but it bled a surprising amount.

Unlike us, I suppose a Shinrin's instinct is to claw instead of punch. I know she didn't want to hurt me, but if it weren't for the clothes we had on, I'd likely need to sew my cheek close. In a strange twist of luck, I suppose this injury is what made my apology go over better than it otherwise might

have. Using the nightmare excuse, she seemed to show me some pity since she realized how new these things were for me. It didn't stop her from teasing me, but at the very least she was quite understanding.

As she dabbed away the blood from my cheek with a rag she'd run to get, I couldn't help but feel some guilt in lying to her like this. Wanting to assuage myself of this negative feeling, I grabbed the rag from out of her hand and began applying pressure to stop the bleeding. "I can do this myself. You shouldn't have to when it's not your fault in the first place."

"Aww, don't be so grumpy. There's nothing wrong with getting scared from a nightmare. I'm probably the last person that should make fun of you for stuff like that... but it is fun to do!" Her voice was a bit different from usual. She seemed to genuinely be trying to cheer me up. "You sure it doesn't hurt? I hit you pretty hard. With how fast it all happened, I didn't get the chance to tell that it was you."

"Would you not have struck if you knew it was me?"

"Why would I?"

"What if I were trying to harm you?"

"You wouldn't do that." She said without a hint of doubt. "If it ever happens again, just make sure to wake me up first. Even if it's late at night, I'll stay up with you for a bit so we can talk and you can go back to sleep peacefully... BUT you have to promise to do the same if it happens to me, got it?"

I couldn't help but chuckle at her proposal. She was such an endearing person that it was hard not to smile when I was with her. Even with the cut in my face tearing as I did so, it was hard to stop.

"What's so funny?" She asked.

"Nothing." I replied, calming myself. "You're... such a sweet person. Thank you for being a good friend to me."

"Huh?" Just as I'd remembered, her face blushed quite noticeably anytime I said kind things to her. I've come to enjoy such reactions from her. "Geez, you're acting weird today, Captain!" Despite the slight annoyance in her tone, she didn't seem to particularly dislike my words either.

"Well, I am a rather strange person."

"Yeah, you are, but you're acting weirder than usual! What even got you so worked up in the first place? Did you dream about a monster or something?"

Ignoring the fact that she'd agreed with me, I needed to find a way to answer her question without revealing anything I shouldn't. I suppose if I left things vague it should be fine. Afterall, there would be no logical way to accuse me of anything without specific details. My brief experience with dreams has shown me that they can be just about anything.

"I dreamt that you and I were being chased through the woods. I couldn't tell if the others were there, but no matter how hard we ran, we couldn't escape from it. Eventually, whatever *it* was, caught up to us and... I couldn't do anything to save you—" To my own surprise, my voice cracked and I

suddenly felt my throat tighten. Noticing something was wrong, my friend moved closer which caused me to clear my throat and try to move on. “Either way, it was just a dream in the end. I’m simply not used to how real they can feel at times—”

Suddenly patting my back, she gave me a sweet smile. “I never realized you cared about me so much, Captain. You’ve got a real mushy heart, don’t you?”

“It’s not—Wait, what does that even mean?” Instead of answering me, she leaned her head against my shoulder while giggling.

“It’s kind of funny seeing you all embarrassed like this. There’s nothing wrong with caring about each other, dummy. We’re friends after all.”

Having her leaning against me, I felt as though my body acted on its own. Resting my head atop hers, I pulled her into a side embrace. Immediately, she stiffened and let out a surprised yelp. “We are.” I said aloud, reaffirming her statement. Her reaction was different than I remember it being. She seemed a bit uncomfortable. Realizing that things were different, I let go. Pulling apart from each other, there was a bit of an awkward pause before I apologized with a quiet, “Sorry.”

Snapping out of her surprised state, Rosalia quickly assured me, “No, it’s fine! Senga and I hug all the time so it’s the same for us too, right?” Trying to find her words she hesitated a bit. “It’s just... I guess it’s sorta hard to get used to since I’ve never really had another friend.”

“Ah, I see.” Was the only thing I could say as my bravery suddenly vanished. The awkward air between us only grew as we seemed to have trouble facing one another. Clearing my throat, I suddenly thought of an excuse to get myself out of this situation. “I’ll go get the food.” I said aloud, mostly to myself, as I got up quickly and walked away. Once I’d made it to the table, I breathed a sigh of relief. I’ve held her before and yet simply due to the change in circumstance everything felt different. Why exactly is that? Feeling the rapid beating of my heart, I began to wonder if such excitement was good for my health.

This should be the least of my worries.

How am I going to keep us from dying again?

I’d been so distracted by Rosalia that I’d pushed it into the back of my mind. Crawling down my cheek, I felt a drop of blood inching its way towards my neck. It seems my cut is still bleeding. After wiping away the blood with my finger, I stared at it. The way it stained my finger seemed to trigger something incredibly unpleasant. All at once, the sharp, metallic smell flooded my nose and nearly made me wretch. My heart began to beat even faster than before and I suddenly found it hard to catch my breath. No matter how many breaths I took, it felt as though I were slowly suffocating.

In my bones, I could feel the wooden shafts of those arrows and bolts grinding against them. My legs buckled from beneath me and I fell to the floor. Seeking comfort, I tucked myself into a corner and tried to rid these thoughts from my mind. Why am I suddenly feeling overwhelming fear? Why can’t I breathe?

I'm going to have to go through it all again, aren't I?

I can stop it from happening. All I need to do is stop the house from catching on fire... But then again, the Shepherdess is no longer interfering. Does that mean we're safe? Or... Does it just mean that something else could go wrong instead?

Am I going to die again?

My hands began to shake as I gripped my uniform to try and make it stop.

Is it going to be painful?

My throat felt tighter and tighter to the point where it was almost as if I were being choked.

Will I have to watch her die again?

Why do I have to suffer like this?

How much can you suffer?

Do you even have the will to keep doing this?

Will it matter in the end?

Will our soul become unsalvageable?

I can't do this...

"Hey!" Rosalia's voice suddenly snapped me back to my senses. "You get lost or something? If you need help just say so!"

Pinching my arm, I forced myself to regain control and got up on my feet. Yelling back, I reassured her. "I'll be there in a moment!" By re-focusing on the task before me, the horrible feeling went away. Hurriedly, I ran into the kitchen, shoved a random selection of food onto the wooden slab, and walked back out.

What was that strange feeling? Could it be an effect of the covenant? The walk to the couch felt like an eternity, but Rosalia was blissfully unaware of everything that had transpired. Eyes glued to the food, it wasn't hard to tell what she was thinking. She motioned for me to come sit by her side and I placed the meal between us.

Immediately digging in, she began stuffing her face the moment the board touched the couch. She ate at an astonishing pace before suddenly slowing down and asking, "You want some water?" with her mouth full.

"Hm? Oh—Yes... I would appreciate it."

"Captain?" She seemed to almost catch on that something was wrong but seemingly dropped it because she was distracted by the want to get back to eating. "Gimme a sec to go get it."

In her absence, my mind began to wander once more.

I'm willing to do whatever it takes to save my friend's life

It's what I thought, and it hasn't changed either. That being said, it feels much different now that I'm reliving the past. Can I really save our lives with knowledge alone?

I'd been absentmindedly stuffing my face with bread and this only became apparent to me once I realized my mouth was too dry to swallow it. The rush of adrenaline from choking forcibly cleared my mind and focused me on my current dilemma. Luckily, Rosalia had just returned which led to me snatching the water from her hands and quickly downing it in an effort to push the bread down.

"You alright?!" She yelled while smacking my back to help dislodge the food from my throat.

"I'm—I'm fine... Maybe I should have waited for you to come back first."

After breathing a sigh of relief, we both had a laugh about the fact that I'd almost lost my life to a piece of bread. Thinking about it, if I had actually died there, I don't know if I'd be able to face the Shepherdess again. The shame of failing in such a way would likely have destroyed my soul instantly.

Now that I had calmed down a bit, I began to think more rationally. If the Shepherdess's meddling had caused my ill fortune before, then surely things should be better this time around, right? Still, that doesn't mean I should rely on luck to get us through. I know for a fact now that Rosalia's explosives are more than capable of distracting the guards, however, they're also more than capable of ending our lives. I need to figure out how to decrease its power and fire creation without revealing—

"What ya thinking about?"

"Hm?" I looked at her, a bit surprised that she'd noticed. "Was it that obvious that I was thinking of something?"

"Mhm, it's a lot easier to tell when I can kinda see your face through that slash I made. You were just staring straight ahead at nothing."

"Ah... It's never been an issue until now." I didn't like her staring so intently, but she continued to dig deeper regardless of my discomfort.

"Is something else bothering you? It feels like you've been holding something back... Are you worried about the escape?"

"I am." I admitted since I didn't feel I could get away with hiding the truth. "There's so many aspects that could go wrong and yet I know so little. It's hard to think things through when there's so many unknowns."

"Hmm, it's not like I really know what Maia is gonna do, but I can at least show you the stuff I've been working on now that we're close to the end. How's that sound?"

That was the thing I feared the most right now, however, there was something that could help me figure out what went wrong.

"Maia is the one who helped you get all those supplies, right? What exactly did she get for you in those barrels?"

"Huh? In the barrels? Did she tell you they were for me?"

Realizing I accidentally alluded to information I wasn't supposed to know yet, I tried to rationalize my question. "I was just curious as to what was in the barrels. I've simply put things together in my mind given that many went into the room and you've been busy working."

“Oh, I guess that makes sense.” Wagging a finger at me, she replied, “Still, I’m not gonna reveal my secrets. Not even to a friend like you. I might’ve told that lady what to get, but she’s got no idea how to turn those things into what I’m gonna show you.”

“She hasn’t asked you to do anything differently from how you normally do it, has she?”

Looking at me with a strange expression she answered, “I guess so. She brought in a lot more barrels of oil than I asked for. It should make for a bigger fire, but—Be honest with me, did she tell you? It sorta seems that way!”

“No no, not at all!” Racking my brain for any sort of excuse, I finally decided to pin some of the blame on Maia. “Well... She did let enough slip out that I’ve been able to put all the pieces together. After what I saw at the ceremony, it’s hard to overlook the similarities. The smell of that black p—Whatever that black, sand-like thing that’s on you, it reminds me of it. On the very day I met you, that strange explosion happened. For some time, I thought it was a coincidence, but then I began to think that perhaps the Gods had given you a special gift you were hiding; now, I simply understand that it’s something you’ve been creating in secret.”

“You really figured that all out on your own? You really didn’t get told what it was?”

“You doubt me quite a lot... I still don’t know what *it* is exactly, but I understand that it causes those explosions and that we’re somehow going to use it for our escape.”

She suddenly stopped eating and stared down at her food instead. “Are you really smarter than I thought you were?”

Her harsh words almost made me physically recoil. “Did you think I wasn’t?”

“N-No! You speak like you were taught pretty well in your past life, but...” Nervously fidgeting, she finally admitted, “You’ve kinda done some crazy things too that made me wonder...”

“I did those things for your sake!”

“Yeah, but—”

“If anything, it’s come more as a shock to me that you’re skilled in making these strange things. For someone who’s gotten herself into so much trouble, I didn’t expect you to actually be intelligent.”

“That’s mean!”

“And yet it’s the truth. As skilled as you are, in whatever it is you do, you seem to put little of that thought into preventing your impulsive actions. I understand you’re young but—”

“Stop treating me like a kid when you’re not that much older!”

“I never called you a child, did I? You’re the only one who constantly takes offense at the fact that we’re both young.” Knowingly jabbing at her insecurity as revenge for her previous comment, I had to turn my head to ensure she couldn’t see my smile through the tear in my hood.

“You—Argh! Whatever! Fine, you want me to show you how smart I really am? I guess it won’t hurt to teach you a little about the process of making black powder. At least then you’ll get an idea of

the hard work and smarts it takes to make this sort of stuff. You're gonna be my helper though and I'm not taking a *no* after all the things you said!"

"You're serious about teaching me?" Surprised by this great opportunity, I couldn't let it pass me by. "Then I'll happily accept. This could prove useful."

"Huh?" She suddenly pointed a finger at me. "If I didn't trust you, I'd think you were tricking me! You agreeing to something like that so easily is weird... But, I guess whatever your reason, it'll at least help you understand things better, right? You get to stop worrying and I get some help. Sounds pretty good for the both of us."

Nodding in agreement, we went back to eating in relative silence. Despite only minor changes having been made so far, I felt as though understanding Rosalia's black powder better could lead to a safer outcome. As for now, my primary concern should be avoiding the hazards of her demonstration itself. As I chewed the dry meat in my mouth, I mulled over possible strategies until I came upon a very simple solution. If the house catching fire was the main issue previously, why not just move away from it? Not wanting the idea to slip from my mind, I quickly turned to my friend.

"Say Rosalia, were you planning on having the demonstration out in the backyard?"

"How'd you figure that out?" She asked, growing suspicious once again.

"Ah, I... W-Well, you can't have explosions go off inside the house, so it needs to be done outside. That's logical, isn't it?"

"That's right, but there's no explosions so you don't have to worry."

"Is that so?" I answered, feigning surprise. "In that case, there's a favor I'd like to ask of you..."

There was only one other place I knew of where we could do such a thing and be left alone. Feigning sentimentality, I asked if we could go to my sanctuary one last time as I'd likely never see it again. Since I was asking it as a favor, and it didn't interfere with her demonstration, she couldn't bring herself to deny me. Finishing our meal, she took me back into Maia's room.

Apart from carrying the bags of black powder as before, I also took our excursion as an excuse to bring along two waterskins in case we got *thirsty*. In reality, this was meant to extinguish any fires, or at the very least help fight it until I could throw dirt on it or do something else. Although I was still a bit nervous, I felt much more confident than when I'd initially thought of going through this again.

Along the way, we couldn't speak much as there were others patrolling and passing by. Walking with the bag covering my armband's number, nobody questioned us as we didn't stand out in any particular way. Since Rosalia's new uniform had come with an updated rank on her armband, she now technically outranked me, being number 1525. There was absolutely no way I was going to bring this fact to her attention though. The moment I did, I knew she'd never let me hear the end of it.

Due to our earlier *incident*, the wind kept tugging at the tear in my hood as though it were trying to remove it. As annoying as it was, it wasn't uncommon for our uniforms to be damaged at times. Were it not for my status as a prison escapee, I could have received a new hood from the supply

room in the main building, or at least the materials to mend it myself. Then again, maybe this'll help push me to start taking this off more. I can't stay the same as I am. I'm no longer 719, I'm *Captain* and people don't normally cover their faces as far as I've seen.

Coming to terms with the changing times, I remained a bit stuck in my head until I realized we were coming to the end of our journey via the main path. Up next, we would be venturing into the woods, and after making sure nobody saw us, we slipped into the relative safety that the forest provided. Quite surprisingly, Rosalia decided to take the lead. Although I initially doubted her sense of direction, I was shocked when I saw my own tree marking come into view. When I first showed her all of this I thought she hadn't been paying attention, but had I been wrong?

Curious, I asked to which she replied, "This place of yours has a lot of flowers growing around it. The wind was blowing towards us so I caught a whiff of it. There's flowers everywhere technically, but it's a lot stronger here."

"A Rose led by roses?"

"What?"

"Nothing, just a pointless comment. Let's get your demonstration set up so that we can get back before anyone notices we're gone. Maia will likely get angry if she finds out how far we traveled."

I watched as she diligently began to prepare everything. At first, I thought to perhaps ask her to use less black powder, however, a thought occurred to me. Could the Shepherdess have also interfered with the powder itself? She was trying to subtly kill me and make it seem natural. If she had tampered with it, the best way to find out would be in a more controlled setting such as this.

"Hey Captain, you think it's gonna rain today?"

Catching me off-guard, I replied, "It is." without bothering to look up.

"You can tell? Is it something Soras can do?"

"Umm, not exactly, I just have a feeling it will... Anyways, you should focus on your task so you don't obliterate the both of us."

"It'll be fine!" She replied, waving away my concern. "Actually, since you're not doing anything, can you go get some branches and stuff to make a decent sized campfire? Maia had some firewood outside her house, but since that stuff was heavy, I figured we'd just get some here."

Heading into the woods, I gathered what I could find lying around, which were mostly large twigs and small branches. While searching for more scraps, I looked up to see something that astounded me. Yellow roses were rare already, but this was the first time I'd ever seen one of two colors. Although only the edges and small patches in the middle were pinkish, it was a yellow rose overall. It was almost as if it had been splattered with dye as the pink sections weren't a solid color. Some were very light while others were concentrated to the point of being red. I never knew that these things could cross their colors like this. Taking it along with me, I placed it in my pocket and carried the wood back.

Stepping into the clearing, I found Rosalia sitting on the log, facing away from me. After putting down the wood I'd gathered, I went over to check on her. She seemed to be picking the dirt from her fingernails as she'd presumably dug the hole for the final demonstration with her bare hands again. As I came closer, she looked up at me; having removed her hood while I was gone, I could see her cheery face.

"You already got the wood? That was pretty fast. Oh, what's that?" Her eyes immediately went to the flower. "Another flower? And it's got different colors too. That's pretty interesting, I've never seen one that looks like this before. Must be lucky!"

Unbuttoning her jacket, I turned away as she brought out her book. When I turned back, I saw that she flipped to a page that contained my previous gift to her. I was shocked that it still maintained most of its color and shape, albeit flattened. For the amount of time that had passed, it should have wilted and fallen apart by now.

"You don't mind if I keep it?" She asked, obviously planning to flatten it as well.

"I brought it as a gift for you."

"Then, thanks. I'll think about getting something nice for you too someday."

Looking around for a moment, I turned back to see her making space in her book for the new flower. "I never knew you could keep flowers in such a way. I'd meant this demonstration here to be my final memory of this place... I suppose now there's a physical reminder as well."

"Mhm, why keep it to just memories? We're probably gonna do so much in the future that we might forget some parts of the past. That's part of the reason I wanted to keep them. Also, because they're pretty... and because you gave it to me when we first met."

There was a silence between us as she took the new flower and rubbed it between her fingers before taking in the smell. After admiring it, she placed it in the book and gently closed it, sealing away the memories of our time in the Academy as well as our first and last time meeting in this place.

Gazing over at the demonstrations, I could identify each one and knew what to expect. It was only the final one, the hole that had already been dug and filled with black powder, that worried me. To give Rosalia credit, she did have the sense to place it near the center, which meant it was further from the trees, but this worked on the assumption that it would behave as intended. As much as I wanted to convince her to use less powder, I also needed her to see firsthand if things went wrong. It would only be through her own observation that she'd make any serious change. With a quiet sigh, I brushed my hand over the waterskins. I wonder if this will be enough.

Placing my hand on Rosalia's shoulder, I squeezed it gently as if to signal for her to start. "If everything is ready, then let's start."

I could tell by the way her tail smacked my leg that she was brimming with excitement. "Even if Maia spoiled some of the surprise, you're still gonna be blown away, trust me!"

Her phrasing couldn't have been worse, yet the show went on regardless of my nerves. Just like before, she started by showing me the unnaturally colored flame. Despite already knowing what would happen, it was still a very curious thing to see. When she turned to see my reaction, I did my best to feign surprise.

"That's quite the strange sight. How does someone even figure this out?"

Without meaning to, this triggered her long explanation as to what *alchemists* and *alchemy* were. For the sake of not having to remember differences, I tried to respond to everything just as I had before. Once she neared the end of her explanation, I thought she would say the same line about becoming her apprentice, however, this time it changed.

"Captain, you think that maybe someday you'd wanna be an alchemist too?"

Catching me by surprise, I couldn't help but show it with my sudden jerk backwards. "I—I thought I'd already agreed to help you. You're suggesting you'll teach me more than just some basics? I thought you weren't willing to show other people."

"You're not just some random person to me, and I'm not planning on showing you how to make black powder by yourself. There's some other stuff I could teach you that might be helpful. For example, when we get back I'm gonna work on something that's like a firestriker, but it instantly lights and it's really easy to carry. I'm sure that starting a fire whenever you want could be pretty useful to you, right?"

Although I wasn't exactly sure what caused this change, I was more than happy that such a thing occurred. "That sounds quite interesting. I'm not sure about being an alchemist, since there's much I don't understand about it, but I'm open to learning more."

"Then it's a promise! But before that, let's finish up here. So far, everything's looking pretty good and that's... pretty good!"

Her next presentation was also free of issues as it was fairly simple as well. Just as before, the fire marched along the line of black powder and ignited the pile of wood I'd brought in an instant. Much to her dismay, however, I didn't let the fire last long as I quickly walked up and put it out with the water I'd brought.

"Hey! I wanted to watch it burn for longer! Why'd you go and drown it?"

"Because we're in the middle of the forest and too much smoke will make people think there's a wildfire in progress. Even if we would have stayed at Maia's house, the same issue would have arisen." Putting my foot down, unlike before, I made my terms for the next presentation clear. "We're here to test your work, not for fun." Seeing the disappointed look on her face made me rethink my approach. "I understand you were excited to show me, and I'm impressed, but I can't risk anybody seeing us. Someday in the future, when we're in a better place, I promise I'll help you make a much more grandiose show for us to enjoy."

"That's another promise I'm gonna hold you to, alright?" She replied, fairly serious this time.

“Then you can add it to your book in order to not forget. For now, I need to focus on dispersing this smoke.”

Before she could say anything else, I flew up towards the smoke and began spreading it out. As I did so, I glanced down and saw the way she stared at me in awe. I suppose for someone like her, seeing a person fly must be just as surreal as when I initially saw her animal-like features. Based on what she told me, this was the first time she’d seen me do this outside of the ceremony.

Seeing the look of joy on her face as she saw me in the sky, I felt rather bad about the way I reacted to her differences in contrast. The face covering often saved me in this regard, but even if she didn’t notice, I’m rather ashamed of how I reacted to her differences. Before dying, I promised to treat her better the next time I saw her. More than simply surviving, I want to improve these unlikable aspects of myself. At the very least, for my friend’s sake.

Finishing my task, I came down and received the same comments about how quickly my health had improved. Listening to the same things and replying in the same ways had the effect of causing my mind to wander. Up next was the giant pillar of flame and I was down to only a single waterskin after the campfire took longer to put out than I expected.

“Captain?” Focusing my attention back to what Rosalia was saying, I realized she’d been asking me something. “You busy thinking about something else? If you wanna ask anything, I’ll try and find a way to answer it for you.”

“Sorry, I was just...” Not seeing a point in hiding the truth, I told her my concern. “Well, your final presentation seems larger than the others. Have you taken precautions in the event that something goes wrong?”

I don’t know why I bothered as I already knew her response and how she’d brag about how spectacular the final demonstration would be regardless of my worry. There was no doubt that it would be *spectacular* but the level of this spectacular-ness is what tied my stomach in knots as she went over to the line of powder and began striking the metal against the sparking stone. The moment the line of powder caught light I almost felt the urge to run away. Fighting this impulse, I stayed still, not only because I needed to witness the result to see if anything had changed, but because I also had to grab her should the worst come to pass. As she rushed back over towards me, I grabbed her by the shoulders reflexively and pulled her back further.

“Don’t be scared! It’ll be fine!”

Taking my hands off her shoulders, I hovered them around her waist in anticipation for the flames coming close. The moment I see it coming, I’ll pull her to the ground beneath me and worry about putting out the fires afterward. Remembering Rosalia’s keen hearing, I steadied my breath so that she wouldn’t notice how anxious I was. As the fire crept closer to the hole, we simply stood and watched, excitement ran through the both of us for completely different reasons. Ever so softly, a gentle wind began to blow and I could feel my heart nearly stop. Just as I was about to check how much water

was left in the waterskins, the fire suddenly leapt out of the hole, bursting out as a giant column of fire. I instantly moved to tackle Rosalia to the ground, my fingertips barely touching the fabric of her uniform, when I suddenly saw the mighty pillar of flame disappear into a thick cloud of white smoke... Was that it?

Have I been placing all of the blame on my friend for no good reason?

As she turned back to me, I couldn't help but laugh out of the sheer relief I felt. She seemed to interpret this completely differently and basked in the supposed awe I was in.

"I told ya it would be great, didn't I?"

As nerve wracking as all of this was, I've confirmed the cause of the fire. It truly was just the Shepherdess all along... She'd told me as much, but I suppose a part of me had blamed Rosalia regardless. I never expected her to actually be capable of doing such amazing things so competently. My new master had used this poor girl as a scapegoat for her own meddling. She was honest about it when confronted, but I'm not sure how to feel about this. Will she do this again in the future?

She better not harm my friend.

Maybe I'm just overreacting, she only did such things out of desperation.

But if she was willing to do it once, it doesn't mean she won't do it again.

Breaking me from my thoughts, Rosalia waved her hand in front of my face. When she noticed me look down at her, she flashed me a toothy grin. "Left ya speechless, huh? I gotta admit though, it went even better than I thought it would. A little heavy on the smoke, but you can help with that. It's been a while since I last made this stuff so I was worried I'd get rusty. Guess, I'm just a natural genius when it comes to this stuff, right, right?" She playfully elbowed me before stopping once she grew concerned from my lack of reaction. "Captain?"

The smoke billowing into the air triggered my memory of what happened to Maia's roof. "The fires!" I shouted as I ran over towards the hole and extinguished whatever embers remained. Quickly taking to the sky, I scanned for any other signs of fire. Despite seeing nothing, I still splashed some water on trees and anything else I suspected of being a potential hazard. I must have looked ridiculous, but anything was worth avoiding a repeat of what had happened before. I continued to scan for even the smallest hint of an ember, but there was so much smoke that it caused my eyes to water and ruined any ability to spot anything. Retreating back to where Rosalia was waiting, I rubbed the material of my face covering on my eyes in an effort to get the stinging sensation to go away.

"Oh geez, I think spreading it out only made it worse! We gotta get the heck outta here before someone comes!" Pulling me by the arm, Rosalia dragged me over towards the supplies we'd carried over. By now it was mostly just empty bags so we scrambled to pick them up and then hurried to get away from the disaster we'd created. As far as I saw, it was just a bunch of scorched grass, burnt wood, and holes in the ground. Hopefully, they'll just think someone tried to start a fire and abandoned it.

Realizing this was my last time ever coming here, I turned back but only saw Rosalia rushing to put her hood back on.

“Did you forget something back there?” She asked upon noticing my gaze.

“No, I was just... It’s the last time I’m going to see that place so I wish I could have taken a moment longer to appreciate it. I know it doesn’t make sense to you, but that place held a lot of meaning to me. I—”

She patted me on the back and pushed me to continue jogging. “I get you, but now’s not the time to feel all mushy. We’ve got the whole world to explore, so look forward to that instead, buddy!”

“Ever the optimist, aren’t you?”

“If I wasn’t, then you’d be gloomy all the time.”

“Fair enough... Thank you for cheering me up. I’m not sure why I’m suddenly feeling sentimental about a place I’m more than glad to leave. It’s a rather senseless emotion, isn’t it?”

“I told you before, you’ve got a mushy heart.”

“You still haven’t explained what that word means in that context—” Rosalia suddenly stopped and pushed me towards a nearby tree. Pointing to the sky, we watched as a pair of Sora flew over towards my sanctuary. Lowering my voice I whispered, “I suppose we should keep our mouths shut for now.”

For the rest of our journey back, we had to resort to communicating with hand gestures and tugging on one another’s uniforms. Once we were back on the main path, groups of guards and random Cogs would rush past us as they made their way over towards our previous location. None stopped to question us as most were preoccupied with investigating, getting water, or carrying on with whatever tasks were assigned to them before the smoke appeared. As such, we didn’t seem suspicious as Cogs were trained to not deviate from their tasks unless instructed to by a proper authority.

Had the alarm bells rung, things would have been different, as we’d need to report to our barracks or closest authority. Since an emergency hadn’t been declared, likely due to a lack of fire, we had free rein to walk back home with no issues.

Upon nearing Maia’s house, the traffic had died down considerably to the point where it was just us two. Rosalia seemed giddy with excitement over what we’d done and upon entering the house she quickly jumped past me and slammed the door shut.

“Geez, I could feel my heart pounding the whole way! I can’t believe we got away with all of that! Did you see how all of those people just walked past us? That was so scary!”

“It was, but you did a good job remaining calm despite it all. Let’s put this stuff away and rest for a while. It’d be nice to have a bit of peace after all of that. Nice work on your demonstrations by the way. It was quite the display, especially that last one.”

“Told you! You were worrying a ton over nothing!” She hesitated for a moment before admitting to me. “Still, I guess it was a good idea for you to have brought the water. To tell you the

truth, I'd made a small batch of a different mixture that should've made the fire even bigger, but it was probably best I went with the normal one. With how freaked out you were with your nightmares and carrying that water with you, I thought it'd be really mean if I put you through that."

"Wait, what did you just say?" I stopped her in her tracks, completely dumbfounded by what she just admitted to.

"There's another mixture I made, not much, but it should be more potent—"

"Don't use that for the escape. Promise me right now that you'll either dump it or find some other use for it."

The tone of my voice seemed to scare her as she put her hands up in an effort to calm me down. "Relax, it was only supposed to be used for the last one. It was meant to show off how big I could make the combustions. If it worked out well, then I was maybe gonna use it for a firebomb, but that one's a lot smaller."

"And what if that explosion ended with one of us being injured? The powder is already strong enough as it is! What use do you have to try and make it stronger?" Noticing that I had raised my voice, I backed off.

"I thought it would be good against a Toma in armor, or a bunch of people... Since you might get outnumbered, I thought it could help you."

"I understand but... I suppose I see your reasoning." Feeling some regret in my actions, I lowered my head. "I'm sorry, I thought you were just being impulsive and wanting to show off."

"It wouldn't kill you to have some faith in me..."

"I do have faith in you... but there's also unknowns that can happen at any time. A small mistake, a random breeze, any unforeseen circumstance we can't even think of, it wouldn't be your fault but it could do a lot of harm. You're clever and well-meaning, but we're not in a position to be taking unnecessary risks right now." Placing my hand on her hood, I softly rubbed the top of her head. "Forgive me for always worrying but I want to keep you safe—Well, all of us safe."

She seemed to cheer up a bit and didn't pull away from me. "I guess I see your point. I'll keep the powder in a special firebomb, but I'll only use it as a last resort, promise."

I nodded in response. Although I can never be sure how much blame should be placed on the Shepherdess and how much on Rosalia, at this point I was just content to avoid the previous disaster. It seems that my friend finally decided to listen to my warnings. Reining her in was likely the main factor in avoiding disaster, but I can't deny that she's also skilled in what she does. As far as I could tell, she seemed to genuinely have things under control, aside from the issue with the smoke.

Then again, I have so little knowledge in the field of alchemy that I mostly have to rely on her honesty and my own limited observations. If I find some way to inform her of the issues with the fire, will she be able to fix it in time? I'm going to have to place a lot of faith in her skills, but I suppose if

there's anybody I'm willing to place my faith in, it would be the person who willingly gave their life to try and save mine.

Solving a big issue should have eased my mind, but now I simply focused on the next one. Things are very likely to change now that the fire was avoided, but what exactly will those changes be? I suppose if I had any way to know, the Shepherdess wouldn't have given me such a dangerous gift.

With all of these thoughts centered around change whirling in my head, the only solace I could take was that the girl in front of me was still the same person I've grown fond of. No amount of otherworldly meddling seems capable of changing that. Come to think of it, I've forgotten to uphold one of the promises I made to her before I died. Reaching my hand up towards my hood, I took a breath to build up my courage when I suddenly heard a dreadfully familiar voice call out to us.

"As nice and sappy as all of this is, you better have a good explanation as to what the two of you were up to." Our heads immediately snapped towards the direction of the voice as Maia stepped out from the shadow of the hallway. It hadn't occurred to either of us that she might return early. Had she really been lying in wait the whole time? She'd been so quiet that even Rosalia hadn't noticed her.

"Oh, uh—It's nice to see you!" Rosalia cheerfully lied as I noticed her grip the sleeve of her uniform tightly.

"I noticed a lot of guards running towards some smoke out in the middle of the forest. You mind explaining to me what happened?"

Unexpectedly, Rosalia stepped forward. "We... We went out into the woods instead of your backyard because we were worried about the smoke attracting attention. It was my decision and I just had Captain help me carry everything. I'm sorry if it caused trouble!" I didn't understand why she was shifting the blame to herself. Bowing and with her hands clasped in a pleading gesture she added, "We made sure not to leave anything important behind."

I stood there rather dumbfounded as Maia walked over. Giving me a menacing glance, she stopped in front of Rosalia and pulled her hood off.

"What was the point of making such a big mess out of your little *test*? You told me it would be something simple. From what I can see, there's nothing *simple* about that!"

Rosalia seemed to shrink in size as Maia's voice raised. "T-The reason for it is that I needed to see how it would react in a larger quantity. I mean, we're gonna be using a ton of it, so I—"

Maia reached out her hand to grab Rosalia and without thinking I grabbed her wrist. The look Maia gave me in turn sent chills down my spine, however, it only made me hold onto her tighter.

"Let go." She commanded sternly.

"You're going to hurt Rosalia if I do." As I said that, I suddenly had a realization. "Have you hurt either of those girls while you were with them?"

“What? Of course not.” I turned to Rosalia and she confirmed Maia’s statement. “Maybe I’ve been too easy on them though. Like it or not, we’re going to be stuck together for quite a while. If you’re going to act like it, I’ll discipline you like children.”

Maia tried to free herself with her other hand, but I managed to grab it as well. Now that I was no longer injured, she lacked the strength to overpower me. Even with the clear disadvantage, she didn’t seem intent on giving up.

“Maia, you need to stop.” Although I wanted to protect Rosalia, I also didn’t want to harm Maia. Perhaps sensing this, she suddenly kned me in the groin which shocked me enough to let her go as I fell to the floor.

“Why’d you do that?!” Rosalia yelled at her.

Stepping over me, Maia grabbed Rosalia’s chin and forced her to look up at her. “I don’t appreciate you lying to me. If you’re going to put us all at risk, for whatever stupid reason you had, then at the very least you could own up to it. You two need to grow up and realize the situation you’re in before you get yourselves killed. Since hitting you won’t go over well with Senga, Captain here will be the whipping boy. Anytime you mess up, I’ll take it out on him.”

“That’s not fair!” Maia kicked me once again, however, I could feel her barely put any force into it. Quickly realizing that she was giving me an out, I played along so that she wouldn’t up the force. “Stop! Stop! Okay... I’m sorry for lying.”

“Go wait in my room. We’re going to have a chat and then once I’m done I’ll let your sister chew you out a bit.”

“You don’t need to tell Sunny!” Maia motioned that she was going to kick me again and Rosalia relented. Kneeling down, she quickly apologized to me for what happened.

“Don’t worry about it.” I whispered back. “Thanks for trying to take the blame.”

Standing up before Maia decided to say something, she obediently went into the room and closed the door behind her. Once Maia checked to make sure she wasn’t looking, she kneeled down beside me and offered her hand.

“You deserved that first one.”

“I can still feel it in my gut.” I groaned as I got to my feet.

Wrapping her arm around my neck, she brought me close to her. “I’m impressed you finally grew a pair and tried to stand up to me.” Although I wasn’t quite sure what she meant, I assumed that what she’d just whispered was a compliment. “That being said, you need to do the same to her. Why are you standing up to me, but still letting her drag you around? It’s not like she’ll stop being your friend if you tell her *no* every once in a while. No good relationship is one-sided and if anything people will like you more if you—”

“It was actually my idea... Rosalia took the blame for some reason.”

“What?” She seemed visibly stunned, finally letting me go from her grasp. “You were the one who asked her to go that far into the woods? I thought you were supposed to be the more sensible one.”

I told her the truth of my fears about what might happen if we did her demonstration here. I mentioned what I’d seen and how it could have easily attracted attention to the house, or even worse, burn down the house itself which housed the explosives. The mention of her thatched roof was something even she hadn’t thought about.

“Hmm... Now that I’m hearing your side, it actually makes a lot of sense why you guys went so far out. Still, why not just tell her all of this? Sounds like you made things pointlessly complicated.”

Trying to hide any hints of a lie, I answered somewhat truthfully, “I’ve realized it’s better for her to come to conclusions herself rather than be told them. When she first told me about her *skill*, I didn’t actually expect her to be so competent. She had good control over the initial fire, but there were issues with the amount of smoke produced and the fact that the embers spread rather far when large amounts of powder is used. This means that fires are likely to spread further than what was originally planned, which will only produce even more smoke. Smoke is good for protecting us against Sora patrols, but if there’s too much smoke and fire then we’ll likely be affected as well. Even worse if you plan on using my ability to fly as I’ll be choked out in the air.”

“You... Really thought this out pretty thoroughly, kid.”

Although I wanted to make the reason behind my actions clear, she seemed to be in disbelief that I’d come to all of these conclusions myself. Realizing that maybe I was revealing too much, I tried to downplay what I’d just said.

“Well, I’ve had quite a lot of time to think things over while I was recovering... I suppose I’ve just been thinking about every single obstacle that might get in the way.”

“I’m not saying you’re wrong in any way. I’m just surprised. You always struck me as a little... nevermind. Anyway, if what you said is true, then I’ll bring it up when I go talk to her.”

“Get rid of those oil barrels.” I plainly said.

“How do you know about those?”

“Reko told me what they were when I asked. I’m not sure how many of those barrels were oil and how many were supplies for creating the powder, but we don’t need to overdo the fire. The explosion itself will already be a large enough distraction.”

“That guy and his mouth... But, I guess I never told him to keep it a secret from you either. Look kid, the point is to cause *chaos*. Not just a little distraction. We need them overwhelmed and scrambling. We need them—”

“*We* need to make it out alive. This is starting to seem more like you ensuring you get your revenge, even if it comes at the cost of our lives.”

“You’re twisting my words.”

“Then why are you fighting against the removal of the barrels? I’m sure Rosalia will tell you the same thing. It’s overkill if our goal is to distract them from us... but you’re making me doubt that’s the true reason for the barrels.”

“This place needs to be destroyed.” Suddenly her true motive came out as she walked away from me. “You’re in over your head trying to understand why I do the things I do. The barrels are to ensure that this place is left devastated, even if we fail, I’ll at least have accomplished that... It’s not like I’m giving up or—”

“No, but your plan to ensure massive destruction is going to get us killed.”

“You don’t know that.” She snapped back. Not being able to think of a reply fast enough that didn’t reveal too much, I stayed silent. “At the end of the day, this is *my* plan. As smart as you kids might be, you’re still children. You don’t understand the world you’re in, and *you* especially barely even understand who you are.” Coming back closer to me, she placed her hand on my shoulder. “I wasn’t lying when I said I don’t want any of you to die. I’ll take Rosalia’s advice, but I’m being clear about what I want here... It’s not like I’ve made plans to die either, but if the worst comes to pass, saving you three might be the only chance I have at some redemption in this life.”

“Maia...” Feeling the weight of her words, I failed to be able to say anything else. Turning my head, I wrapped my arms around her. I was so prepared to argue with her, to accuse her of doing wrongs to us, and yet the truth is as she put it. I have no idea. I don’t know in full detail what is happening in this Academy or why she’s so willing to risk her life to destroy it. I didn’t receive that knowledge in my past life or this one. The only thing I know is that from the moment I’ve met her she’s been someone I could rely on. Even with her many faults, I can’t help but have a deep affection for her.

“Sorry.” I said without even meaning to as I tried to pull away. To my surprise, however, she pulled me back, my cheek resting against her breast once more. This time, however, wasn’t the same as when we were on the couch. It was much more gentle.

“You’re a strange *strange* boy... but you know... I wish we could have met in a different lifetime.” As I turned to look up at her, I noticed that her face changed to a rather disgusted look as she sniffed the air. “What the—You stink! That damn smell is going to drive me crazy! First it’s the little girl stinking up my room with her chemicals and now it’s you!”

“D-Do I smell? I hadn’t noticed. Where do I even go to bathe? I can’t go—”

Letting go of me, she pointed to her kitchen. “Go grab a bucket and fetch some water from the river. When you’re done with your bath you can leave your clothes by the door.”

Being robbed of the tender moment by Rosalia’s powder, I couldn’t help but feel some resentment. Aside from that, I didn’t want to bathe outside at this time of year. “But it’s cold...” I said rather pointlessly as she didn’t seem to care.

There wasn't much room to negotiate as this was her house and she didn't seem willing to let me remain as I was. Defeated, I took the bucket and went outside. It's not the first time I've bathed like this, but it was something I greatly disliked. The whole process would be pure torture, especially because I would have to walk around naked with only a bucket to cover me. The only thing that made this bearable was that it wasn't nighttime so at least a bit of the sun's warmth was still around.

Taking off my clothes, I left it all by the front door as I quickly made my way to the backyard. It's not as if anyone was watching me but—

With a look of shock and disgust, I came to find that Senga was in the backyard. Although my most sensitive area was covered by the bucket, it was a horrible way to present myself to her. I guess, this was where she'd been considering she left with Maia in the morning. Trying to explain myself, I stammered out, "S-Senga, this isn't—" She looked away from me and in desperation I quickly forced out the remainder of my words. "I thought nobody was here, sorry!"

Turning my rear to her and sprinting into the woods, I ignored the pain of the rocks and twigs digging into the soles of my feet in order to simply escape her view. The embarrassment I just suffered was far worse than any of the physical pain I was going through. Slowing down, I began to realize that I didn't even explain to her why I was naked in the first place. My already poor reputation with her would completely sink if she thinks I strip naked when nobody else is around. Maia didn't even have the decency to offer me a rag to cover myself with. Did she know this would happen?

Did she not tell me on purpose?

It annoyed me that I couldn't completely dismiss this thought. Once I'd calmed myself, I began paying more attention to my surroundings. Although it was unlikely I'd come across anyone at the river, the area was still clear enough for a flying Sora to easily spot me. It'd be much faster if I could simply jump in and bathe, but the safer option was to use this bucket to draw some water and simply scrub myself with my hands.

After making sure nobody was around, I quickly drew my water and retreated back to the safety of a nearby tree. The cold is already bad enough when you're naked, it's nearly unbearable once you start splashing cold water on yourself. Every time the wind blew, it only made my misery grow worse. Was the smell really bad enough for Maia to deem this necessary? I could get sick right before we leave. Maybe this was one of those instances where I should have told her *no*. Looking above at the clouds, it seemed as though it would rain soon... Rather, I *know* it'll rain once the sun sets.

Hurrying myself, I ran to the river, quickly dipped myself, and hastily retreated back to the house with the bucket covering what little it could. At this point, I was shaking from the cold and no longer cared if Senga was there. I just wanted to get my clothes on and feel the warmth of the house again.

Nearing the backyard, I spied Senga through the trees. She hadn't noticed me yet so I dashed out of the woods as fast as I could. Our eyes locked for a moment as I silently begged for her

forgiveness. As far as I could tell, from her perspective she simply saw a wet, naked boy running back from the woods after he'd disappeared for a short while. Between this, and what happened with Rosalia earlier, the poor girl was going to be left with so many questions.

Finally getting back to the front door, I looked down and saw no clean clothes. My uniform hadn't been touched. If I put it back on now, I'd simply smell again. Having no other option, I barged in through the front door and instead of Maia, I was greeted by Rosalia.

"Hey Capt— AHHH! W-WHY ARE YOU NAKED?!"

I'd never heard her shriek so loud. Maia came rushing in from the kitchen and was greatly confused upon seeing me.

"Kid, what are you— Wait, don't tell me you washed yourself with cold water!"

"Was I not supposed to? You told me to do this!"

Maia burst into laughter as Rosalia ran to her room and locked herself inside. Trying to get a hold of herself, Maia wiped a tear from her eye and pointed to the kitchen once more. "Go stand next to the stove you idiot. You'll catch a cold if you stay like that."

As confused as I was, I quickly ran to the kitchen in order to hide myself from them. A short while later, Maia returned with a blanket, wrapped it around me, and told me to wait here for now. Apparently, Reko was supposed to be bringing in the last of the supplies. This included brand new uniforms to replace the ones we had. Confused by her previous instructions, I asked, "Then why did you have me leave my clothes outside and go to the river to bathe?"

"I told you to go get water and *then* leave your clothes outside... I didn't expect you to follow exactly what I said. I thought you understood that I meant for you to come back inside. I was going to heat up your water since it's cold out. You understand now? A bit ago you were annoying me non-stop with your questioning and now you couldn't be bothered to ask a single one. Could have saved you from flashing your naked ass to most of our group." Unable to reply, my face simply grew red with embarrassment. "Don't go traumatizing the girls any more than you already have while I'm gone. I need to go get some water for the rest of us."

When Maia returned, she set about transferring the water into a pot in order to heat it. While it warmed, she went out two more times to collect more and by the time she finished, Reko had arrived. As I was still naked beneath the blanket, it was rather embarrassing to be seen by the only remaining group member who hadn't been here to witness my shame. It was even worse when Maia burst into laughter once again while retelling the story of what had happened.

Although the Toma shared a laugh with her at my expense, he at least made up for it by bringing me my new uniform. Finally having it in my hands, I was given some privacy as I changed into it. Just like my previous one, it fits perfectly. My only complaint was that the gloves and boots felt a bit stiff due to the newness of the leather, but I'm sure that'll disappear with time. I thought I'd have more of a sentimental attachment to the uniform that had almost become like a second skin to me, but the

feel of this brand new fabric was simply too good to care. It likely also helped that it was the same exact uniform with two small exceptions, a leather belt that held various pouches that wrapped itself around my waist while also having two straps that clung to my shoulders so that the weight would be better distributed. On the straps themselves were also one pouch for each. In addition to this was another strap of leather around my left leg that contained its own pouch. I recognized the significance of this kit instantly. These various pouches were meant to help Soras who were being sent to far away places as part of a unit. Although we'd also carry regular supply packs, we were often expected to scout ahead, sometimes far ahead, which meant we needed a comfortable way to carry essentials while flying. I would have been elated had Reko managed to grab some armor for me as well, but I suppose it would have attracted too much attention if he'd done that. I'm more than happy to simply receive these small boons.

Although the girls' uniforms were in good condition, they still exchanged them for new ones as there was no reason not to. Apart from this, he also brought for them belts, which only contained two pouches, as well as the pouch that strapped to the leg. After thanking the Toma for his gift, he nodded and spoke of wanting to get back early so he could bathe at one of the bathhouses one last time. Since Maia had gone elsewhere, I saw him off and returned to the kitchen to enjoy the warmth of the stove. A while later, Maia returned to check on the water, and after dipping a finger inside, called for the other girls to come. There were some awkward glances as they collected their water, but after what happened I could hardly face them anyways. Sensing this was the perfect time to make the situation worse, Maia began teasing me.

"Don't even think about peeking on us, alright kid~" Giving me a wink, I simply turned away as I felt an overwhelming sense of embarrassment and annoyance.

"I won't!" Was the only response I could manage but they'd already begun walking away.

I didn't turn away from the stove's fire until I was sure they were gone. Sometimes I wish Maia understood how aggravating she could be. At least I have some time alone now to get over what happened. Hearing nothing, I was reminded of how comforting silence was in the short term. Enjoying this moment of peace, I closed my eyes and let my head rest on one of the cabinets in the kitchen. A few minutes passed before I suddenly heard a noise pierce through the walls. Confused, I had to listen intently to make sure I hadn't imagined it, but it seemed as though they were laughing. If I held my breath, I could almost hear them speaking outside. It's rather surprising to hear them get along.

Curiosity driving me, I got up and crept closer to the wall near the dining table. Quickly ducking, I made sure to avoid the window but found that the wall next to it was the closest and provided the best place to eavesdrop. As I pressed my ear against the wall, I thought I'd be able to hear their conversation, but the most I could make out were random words like *seriously* and *idiot* from what sounded like the voice of Maia. Although it was only a hunch, I had a feeling that I was the topic

of the conversation. I didn't like her speaking of me in such a way behind my back, however, a part of me was also envious. I wish I could speak as freely and make them laugh as she does.

Despite everything we've been through, I still feel like an outsider at times. I suppose it's because I'm often the only male present, and I understand that there's a difference, but I just wish it didn't separate us so much. I'm often treated harsher and with mistrust simply because of it. Would they treat all males the same or is it just with me? I haven't seen them interact with Reko, or others, enough to fully understand.

Panicking at the realization that they'd gone silent, I quickly went back to the kitchen and waited for their return in the same place they'd last seen me. As they entered, the girls remained silent. It seemed rather odd, but before I could wonder what had happened, Maia suddenly popped her head in.

"You've really just been sitting there the whole time?"

"It's warm here."

"Really? Because it looks to me like the fire's starting to die down. I'm not adding any more wood to the stove, so go get your butt over to the fireplace. I brought in enough wood to make sure we spend the night nice and warm. Might as well use it before it's gone forever."

It was a bit sad to know our time in the house was coming to an end, but as I approached the couch and saw Rosalia and Senga I immediately began to feel awkward once more. Senga seemed to have intentionally placed Rosalia at the leftmost edge while she sat closer to the middle. Although she wasn't glaring at me, the look in her eyes wasn't exactly inviting either. Hesitantly, I sat on the opposite end and waited for Maia to disrupt the tension.

"Hey Captain." Rosalia suddenly called over to me. Turning to her, she had a rather smug grin on her face. "Did ya like your bath?"

"Gods... Not you too."

Although it was surprising to hear Senga let out a brief chuckle, it somehow only made the teasing feel worse. The next time Rosalia does something embarrassing in front of me, I'll have my revenge. My sinister scheming was interrupted by a racket in the kitchen. As we turned to see what was happening, Maia suddenly came rushing out with a burning coal placed in between metal tongs. Setting it in the fireplace, she began to blow on it in order to keep it alive. Once it was a bit more stable, she quickly grabbed a wooden device that had what looked like a leather skin that joined two ovalish pieces together. It let in air as she pulled it apart by the two handles and then released it back out of a narrow spout that she pointed towards the coal. The large amount of air instantly began to breathe life into the fire that soon began sprouting forth.

"What is that thing?" I asked, out of simple curiosity.

"Hell if I know. I always just called it a *wind-bag* since all it does is suck up air and spit it out. It's all old and beat up so it's likely from before the war since it came with the house." She stared at the

device for a moment before resting it carefully on the stone ground near the fireplace. "I'm glad we'll be gone from this place, but..."

"It feels strange to know we're leaving this life behind forever." I said aloud, knowing the exact thing she was feeling. "Even if we hate it, we got used to it."

"Yeah... It's not the first time I've had to do something like this, but I've never spent so much time in one place before. It's stupid to get sentimental, isn't it? Month or two down the road, I doubt I'll feel the same... and yet I can't deny that not having a roof over my head anymore will be a pretty big step down."

I wasn't sure what to say to such an observation as I simply didn't have any experience outside of this Academy. Since the other girls remained silent as well, the conversation naturally died out at that point. Tending to the fire, Maia helped it grow until it was a healthy size that filled the room with warmth and a soft glow. Satisfied with her work, Maia sat down beside me and we all sat there watching the fire. Perhaps we all had different thoughts running through our mind, or perhaps we were simply taking the time to enjoy this special moment of tranquility. This strange period of our lives we shared was coming to an end, and I knew, better than anyone, that it was possibly the last time us four would be together like this.

I don't want any of us to die...

And yet we can't stay in this moment forever.

Things will always have to change whether I want them to or not.

Save for the occasional crackling of the fire, all was relatively quiet until drops of rain began to fall against the window. At first a few, but minutes later it suddenly came pouring down harshly. When Rosalia and I had been caught in this storm, I remember how cold the water was and how it sapped what little strength I had left out of my body. Now, however, there was a strange peace in watching such a terrible storm from the comfort of the house. Growing ever more drowsy, I turned to the others to see if they were still awake. Rosalia and Senga were sleeping peacefully, resting against one another with Rosalia's ears only occasionally twitching when the rain would pick up.

Unlike them, Maia still seemed alert. Noticing that I was staring at her, she turned to look at the sleeping pair and suddenly got up. Wondering what she was up to, I watched as she went over to the crate of supplies that Reko had dropped off when he came here earlier. He'd brought far more than we could possibly take, but I assume he was simply grabbing things at random that might be useful. Among these items were blankets, which we were obviously going to take, and for now, were very enticing to use.

Grabbing a pair of them, she laid one over the sleeping girls and then came over to hand me the other. Sitting down next to me, I was confused as there were clearly more in the crate. Seeing the issue, she grabbed the blanket from out of my hands, unfolded it, and spread it out to cover us.

“Don’t feel like folding them in the morning and it’s already pretty warm anyways.” Despite saying this, she came closer and leaned against me as she closed her eyes. “Goodnight.” She said in-between a large yawn.

Feeling my eyes growing heavier, I repeated the phrase back to her, “Goodnight, Maia.” Before I closed my eyes, I looked over to Rosalia and saw one of her ears still perked up.

Is she asleep or is she eavesdropping?

Maybe it's something she does without knowing?

Whatever the case, I ignored it and put the questions off for another day. “Goodnight, Rosalia. Goodnight Senga.” I whispered, and almost as if acknowledging my words, a slight smile came to her face. I would have spent far more time debating with myself over whether or not she could hear me, but I was too tired to do so.

With Maia snuggled up against me, I was almost a bit too warm, however, I didn’t want to wake her up by moving. Being clean, warm, well fed, and resting on a soft couch next to my companions was the greatest bliss I’ve known yet. Taking one last look, I gazed upon Senga. I felt a slight pain in my heart knowing what would have occurred around this time, but that sadness only made this scene before me all the more sweeter.

“Thank you.” I finally whispered quietly, to *no one* in particular.

Chapter XVI
Day of Reckoning

“WAKE UP!” My heart nearly leapt out of my chest as I tried to get my bearings on what was happening. Rosalia and Senga were in a similar state of panic as we wondered what was causing Maia’s loud shouting. “Reko was supposed to meet with me this morning. He wasn’t at our meeting point and he didn’t return here either. I need to go back out to check on what happened.” Despite her attempt to retain a neutral and commanding voice, I could tell she was speaking slightly faster than usual. It’s the closest I’d ever come to seeing her show fear. “You three have an hour to get everything ready before I come back. If we don’t see him by then, we’ll have to leave without him.”

“U-Understood, we will await your return!” In my surprised, half-asleep state, I unconsciously reverted back to my old way of speaking to someone giving orders.

Maia paid me no mind and quickly left. In her absence, there was a bit of a lull as we struggled to make sense of what just happened considering we’d just woken up. Without Maia here to give orders, it was rather chaotic as we hurried to figure out what each of us should be doing. There was a bit of arguing between Rosalia and Senga on what they should prioritize. Senga wanted to make sure everything was packed and ready while Rosalia wanted help with final preparations for the explosive. Knowing which one had the potential to kill us far before supplies even became an issue, I knew what to focus my attention on.

“The explosive needs to be as perfect as it can be, or else it’ll be more dangerous than anything else in this Academy. When I’m done helping Rosalia, I’ll help you anyway I can.”

Surprisingly, Senga didn’t give me any pushback. Following Rosalia into Maia’s room, the smell of that black powder was stronger than I remember. Perhaps it was due to the window being closed, but whatever the case, we were likely going to be covered in it soon which was a shame considering we’d just gotten these uniforms.

Turning to me, she motioned to the barrels in the room. “I can double check everything. The only thing I really need you to do is listen to my instructions on how to set it off.”

“Set it off?” I repeated, almost asking her to not confirm my suspicion. “Do you mean...”

“I know...” She seemed to struggle saying it but she continued. “I really didn’t want it to be this way, but you’re the one who has to light the fuse. I don’t really have experience making timed fuses so I only have a rough estimate of how long it should burn for. Since we have to walk the whole way over to the meeting point in order to blend in, Maia didn’t want to take the risk of it going off prematurely. There’s so many different things that could happen on the way there that there’s no real way of knowing how long I should have set it for anyways. If it’s too long then it’ll be useless as a distraction and we might get caught before it even goes off. Too short and...” Shaking away the thought, she brought out two of the clay pots that Senga had been making. “Anyways, that’s why I made some extra

loud *thunder bombs* in order to act like a signal. It's basically the same thing I used at the ceremony, but tweaked a bit. I'll have the big guy chuck it as far as he can away from us. When you hear it, you're gonna light the fuse and come running, or I guess flying, over towards the meeting point."

"What if I don't hear it?"

"Trust me, you will. I have a backup just in case one is a dud, which shouldn't happen, but I'm taking every opportunity to make sure nothing goes wrong."

I understood the reasoning for all of this, but it didn't make hearing it any easier. "How much time will I have after lighting it? Also, I need to know where this *meeting point* is even going to be. Is it near something recognizable?"

As she packed the clay balls into a small bag she had slung on her shoulder, I realized that they looked different from before. The tops were no longer open and the little ropes we made before, the *fuses*, as she called them, were poking out from atop. Was this the thing she had used during the ceremony?

"Maia's gonna be the one deciding where exactly we meet. I'm sure she'll tell you the specifics before we leave. The fuse is—it *should* be around ten minutes. To make that clear, that's like counting to six hundred. You're either gonna need to make it to us in time, or make sure to be in a safe place when it goes off. Look for somewhere down low, like a ditch, and make sure to cover your ears. You're really fast though so you should have more than enough time to make it back to us."

"I understand, but when you say it's *around* ten minutes, then what happens if—"

"Look, I did the best I could, okay?!"

Realizing she was very stressed, I didn't push her any further, however, I felt strange simply standing and doing nothing. "Do you need me to do anything?"

"No." She quickly responded, basically telling me to stay quiet.

"Can I ask you for a favor?" Although she didn't seem to be in a good mood, this seemed like my last chance to pull this off.

"Just make it quick, I'm really busy."

"I think there's too much black powder and oil in one location. I know you're the most knowledgeable, but it's far more than what's needed for a simple distraction. I'm not sure what Maia said to you, but would you be willing to lessen the amount, even by just a bit?"

Rosalia seemed to hesitate before giving me a response. "I know it's dangerous, but she's not wrong that it'll keep the Academy off our back. As long as we're far enough away, we should be fine."

"And if it goes off early? Or if something happens and I can't make it back to you in time? I'll be stuck to deal with all the smoke."

"I know... but... I'm not sure what to do. You both make good points. All I want is for us to be able to make it out safely."

“Then trust me. I promise you that your explosion is good enough without the overkill of so much oil. I believe in you, but you have to trust me on this.” Putting my hand on her shoulder, I pleaded with her. “All I ask is to lessen the amounts a bit. Just a few barrels. Anything to improve our chances. Please, Rosalia.”

Taking a deep breath, she finally nodded. “Okay... I’ll trust you, Captain.” Overcome with joy at such a burden being lifted, I wrapped her in an embrace but she quickly pushed me off of her. “Geez, now’s not the time!” Her face was just as red as ever. “I-If you wanna lessen the fires, then go ahead and dump some of the oil that’s in this room. I’ll leave the amount up to you. It won’t get rid of the oil, but it’ll at least keep the fire concentrated here since it’ll soak into the floor instead of spraying into the air. I marked the oil barrels with an X.”

“Are the other ones the black powder?”

She nodded before adding, “Most of the powder is in the basement though. The idea was to launch the oil into the air while the barrels here would blast it to the sides. It should spread it out pretty far and—The point is that you should get water to spoil the powder. Go and get enough for around four or five barrels. Do it before Maia gets back!”

Running over towards Senga, I asked her for every waterskin that we had.

“Why? I already tied them to the packs.” Was her response as she struggled to understand my request.

“Please, it’s very important. Help me undo them. I need to collect as much water as possible. Are these already filled?”

She shook her head. “I was going to fill it with the water in the kitchen—”

“That’s perfect! Thank you.”

Heading over towards the hallway, I continued on until I found a door at the back that I’d never seen before. I suppose this explains all the strange noises I heard while recovering from my injuries. The moment I opened the door, I saw how dark it was. The light from the hallway was barely enough to see, but I could tell that the majority of the floor was covered in barrels. Astonished, I couldn’t help but stare in awe for a moment. Had they really filled and transported this many while I was sleeping? Now I knew why Rosalia had spent so long working.

Unable to carry the large water jug down the stairs, I had to think of some other way to transport the water. Since Senga was still busy with the water skins, I looked around and saw the empty wine bottles had been shoved into a corner of the main room. Grabbing them, I went back to the jug and began filling them with water. I had four in total that I cradled in my arms as I made my way down. From what I could tell, the basement itself was about the same size as Maia’s room. Once I reached the first barrel, I realized the issue I now faced, they were sealed shut. Placing down the water, I ran back up the stairs to Rosalia who was busy checking the barrels.

“The barrels are sealed shut. Do I just smash the top open, or—”

“No no no! Don’t do that! You could hit the metal hoops, make a spark, and light the whole place!” Darting to the other side of the room, she handed me a metal bar that had a curved part at the end. “You put this in the small gap where the lid meets the side of the barrel. Then, you just put your weight on the other end. Just make sure to be careful, okay?” Seeing that I was confused, she demonstrated on one of the oil barrels. She maneuvered the curved part in and began to lean on it, however, it didn’t budge in the slightest. Embarrassed, she moved aside and pointed at it. “You do it! I’m busy!”

Doing as she said, I managed to lift the lid off the barrel and saw the oil inside. Grabbing the edge, I tilted it over and spilled it onto the floor.

“Hey! I’m still in here! You—Argh! Whatever, just do whatever you need to do. I’ll work around it.” Exasperated, Rosalia shook her head and did her best to avoid slipping on all the oil I’d just dumped.

Apologizing, I decided to leave the rest of the oil for the end and went back down to the basement. Very carefully, I slid in the curved end of the bar and pried open the top. As soon as I did, a puff of black powder came out and would have covered my face had I not been wearing my hood. Even so, I could still smell its familiar scent. Grabbing one of the wine bottles, I began pouring it all over the powder. I saw as the water began to soak into the sand-like substance. Wanting to ensure that it was properly spoiled, I used another bottle.

I repeated this process for four more barrels, totaling five. Although I wasn’t sure if five barrels would be enough to change the outcome, I trusted Rosalia. Moving back upstairs, I was about to start on the oil barrels before I was stopped.

“How many did you spoil?” She asked.

“Five. I poured two wine bottles worth of water into them.”

She scrunched her nose and sighed. “That’s fine... but, I was thinking and realized it was a big mistake to tell you to dump the oil here. You see, now that there’s oil all over the floor, the moment the fire from the fuse makes its way here, the whole room is gonna catch fire. That means it’s gonna go off early.”

“So I have less time, how much?”

“I don’t know, maybe two minutes less now. Thankfully most of the fuse isn’t inside... I’m really sorry though. I should have—”

“It’s fine.” I patted her head to calm her. “Just tell me where to dump the rest of the barrels and I’ll handle everything else.”

“Alright... I think dumping half of them is a good compromise. We’ll still get a good fire, but we’ll hopefully decrease the smoke by enough that it won’t cause you too many issues. I’ll point out which ones you should take. I wanna try and send the oil splashing in a different direction, just in case.”

Nodding, I began to try and move the barrels. There was no way I'd be able to lift them, so I tipped them over to their side and rolled them outside with some obvious difficulties getting through doors. Although the liquid sloshing around made it harder than it needed to be, I eventually got ten barrels outside. Taking a moment to catch my breath, I went inside for the metal bar. Taking a glance at what Senga was doing, I saw that she was hard at work folding the blankets we had used the night before and packing them into our packs. Although she noticed me staring, she didn't say anything and continued with her task.

I'm still not really sure if she's growing used to my presence or if she only tolerates me for Rosalia's sake. At the very least, we haven't had any issues since our talk. After getting what I came for, I proceeded to yank the lid off the barrels and let the oil flow into the ground of the front lawn. Once I was done, I realized that the barrels would look suspicious so I rolled them into the nearby woods and left them there. Maia will likely notice the oil when she returns as not all of it has seeped into the ground, but at this point what's done is done.

Taking a rest on the couch while Senga went out to get water to fill the waterskins, I soon saw Rosalia heading over towards me. In her hand was the firestriker she always carried around with her. As I tried to grab it, she suddenly pulled back.

"To tell you the truth, I've always been scared of this part. I tried to think of ways to make this safer, but there was so much work to do and so little time... This is one of my most prized possessions, so you better return it to me, okay? I won't forgive you if you—"

With her voice beginning to break, I stopped her. "I'll be fine." I said as I stood up and took the item from her hand. I knew what to expect, we'd taken precautions, and we're acting with purpose instead of reacting to a mistake. In truth, despite all of this I was still terrified to do it all again, but I wasn't about to show my fear in front of her. I needed to be brave for her sake.

"Promise me!" She suddenly grabbed my hand that held the firestarter and didn't let go. "Promise me you'll make it back or I won't let you take it!"

"Rosalia..." I knew she had no choice in the matter. Maia would force her to give it to me anyways, but this wasn't a logical move. She wanted comfort, just as she had before. Placing my other hand on top of hers, I softened my voice to calm her. "I promise you that no matter what, I'll find my way back to you, my *dear* friend."

Unexpectedly, she threw herself towards me, squeezing me tightly. "You better." Quickly letting go, I saw something move out of the corner of my eye. Realizing that Senga had just opened the door, there was an awkward pause as I wondered if she saw us or not. Thankfully, she said nothing as she continued her task. Rosalia left me with her firestarter and went back to double checking her explosive, this time heading to the basement. Feeling rather guilty sitting down and doing nothing while the two girls worked, I turned to Senga and asked what I could help her with. I'd told her I would do as much after I was finished with Rosalia.

“I’m fine, just rest. You’re going to need your energy for what comes next, right?”

“Ah, you’re right...” I was somewhat shocked that she was taking my well-being into consideration. Maybe she’s just ensuring that the job gets done, but I choose to remain hopeful.

Hearing the sound of approaching footsteps, Senga took a glance out the window and informed me that Maia and Reko were returning. Taking a deep breath, I prepared myself for the wrath of Maia. The first to make his way into the house was Reko. Unlike before, he was heavily armored now and carried his weapons. Even his chest protection seemed more bulky than before. His new armor consisted of a helm, chest guard, protection for his arms, and some slight protection for his thighs. His armor was similar to the kind I saw at the ceremony, however, he seemed to have foregone any protection below his knees other than his boots. In the middle of his chest was a blazing sun with twelve rays of light coming off. It was a holy symbol as well, but wasn’t nearly as used as the cog. Right below it were words, likely from the Book of life which read, *Death shall never be known to the Faithful*. Aside from this there were the usual depictions of skulls, hands, and the *ever seeing eye*, which was an eye with a cog in the iris meant to symbolize the ever present gaze of the Gods upon us. The most impressive thing, however, were his weapons. He had a giant circular shield that was about half the size of my body at the least. Its rim was plated with metal and in the middle was a buckler-like plate that bulged out. His sword was smaller than expected, but it was a fine straight sword that seemed made for close combat. I’d never seen him fight before, but his presence alone would be its own deterrent.

He said no words as he gathered his pack, which was close to twice the size of ours. Even with this large pack strapped to him, he picked up an extra one, slinging it across his shoulder as if it weighed nothing. I wanted to ask what he was doing, but there was an uncomfortable air in the room. The two of them didn’t seem to want to talk to each other. Maia was the one who had to break the silence as she came into the room and immediately pointed at me.

“First this idiot pisses me off and now I come back to find that you disobeyed me.” Walking over towards me, she grabbed me by the collar and lifted me closer to her face. “We spoke about this. You *agreed* that it was fine. Why the hell are you doing this then?!”

“I never agreed to your plan. I understood why you were doing it and I’m glad you care about us, but I’m not willing to potentially sacrifice our own group for—”

“Stop!” Senga shouted as Maia suddenly struck my cheek with her fist. Rushing over in an instant, Reko grabbed her and pushed her against the wall.

“You’re stressed. Calm yourself.” Reko commanded as he ensured she remained away from me. “Maybe he is right, maybe he is wrong. We cannot change now. We must work together. Apologize, you did not need to be hitting him.”

Rushing out of Maia’s room, Rosalia came over towards me. Putting her hand on my cheek she asked, “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, don’t worry—”

“What’s your problem?!” Rosalia suddenly shouted to Maia. “We did everything you asked so far except for *one* thing! Captain did this because he doesn’t want you to die either, you idiot! Just because you don’t care about your own life doesn’t mean you can treat ours like they’re worth nothing!”

There seemed to be a change in Maia’s face that was fairly subtle. She almost looked ashamed to be getting told such a thing from a girl much younger than her. Keeping an eye on her, Reko allowed her to walk past him. She came towards me, but stopped when Rosalia stepped forward.

“I...” She hesitated for a moment and looked away. “Sorry, I went too far. All this time I was looking for a way to destroy this place. Now... I guess that won’t be happening.”

“But you’ll have a better chance at living.” I replied.

“I don’t deserve it.” Her response caused an uneasy silence in the room. “You’ll see soon. For what little it means... I’m sorry for trying to drag all of you into my own mess.”

“Maia, what does—” Maia raised her hand to stop Reko from speaking any further.

“Not now.” She responded. “You won’t understand unless you see it. I’ll explain after. If everything’s ready, let’s get moving.”

Senga passed Maia her pack and picked up her own. Realizing this was the moment we were all waiting for, Rosalia came to me and began giving me my final instructions.

“The main fuse goes into the basement, but the one for Maia’s room is connected to the main one anyways. All you have to do is light the one here in the hallway. After that, you’ll have around eight minutes... That’s four-hundred and eighty seconds... Please make it as far away as possible, even if you can’t get to us.” Hearing her voice wavering, I tried to comfort her but she stopped me. “The second you light that fuse, start running. I triple checked everything and even attached extra ones that weren’t really needed. As long as just one goes off, the others will blow in a chain reaction since they all...” Noticing that she was dragging out the explanation, she simplified her instructions. “Just light it and leave, okay? I swear it’ll work so just focus on getting back safely!”

She didn’t need to promise me anything. I trusted, and knew, her explosives would work and I didn’t doubt the fuse would as well. She gave me a hesitant wave farewell and joined the others, grabbing a pack herself, that looked a bit comically oversized for her. As they began leaving, Maia stopped and called back to me.

“Hey, kid, Reko’s taken your pack and sword so don’t worry about that.”

“Won’t I need the sword?” I asked, not wanting to be disarmed.

“If you stop and try to fight, you’re going to die. Use this to keep your head protected if they spot you. You’re a fast flyer, I’ve seen it. The only thing they’ll be able to do against you is try and shoot you down.” Handing me my buckler, she helped secure it onto my forearm with the leather strap that was attached to it. “We’ll be waiting northwest of here, near the mountain prison. Look for us by the edge of the forest. We’ll keep our eyes peeled for you too. Don’t stop for anything, and don’t worry

about us getting overwhelmed either. Any alert will be drowned out the second the explosion goes off and even if the chaos isn't enough, I've got some tricks hidden away in case we really need them. Good luck and—Well, just make it back in one piece, alright?”

Nodding, she gently placed her hand on my cheek. A part of me wondered if she'd heal it, but instead she rubbed it. Sighing, she got to her feet and turned her back, leading the girls out the door who were adjusting their hoods. Not wanting to drag this out any further, I didn't turn to look at them and waited until all of them were gone. Staring at the ceiling for the last time, it didn't occur to me until now, but we've basically been living in a giant explosive waiting to go off for quite a while now.

Is there a chance this entire thing could explode the moment I try to spark the fuse?

I tried to deny the thought as being ridiculous, but it did seem a credible concern. Getting up from the couch, I paced around the house until I found myself in the kitchen. There was a bit of water left in one of the pots they'd used to bathe. Seeing that it had been boiled the night before, it should be fairly clean. I could also go to the river, but what if the signal goes off and I'm not back? Those few minutes could be the difference between life and death for them. Seeing no other options, I took a long drink and calmed myself. On the counter nearby was still a bit of leftover food. Since I hadn't eaten yet, it would be a shame to allow all of this to go to waste, wouldn't it? After a few bites, however, a thought came to mind.

Won't I be exerting myself heavily soon?

Not wanting to risk vomiting, I set down the food and resigned myself to the bit I'd eaten. Having had a small snack and some water, I began to think if there were any other things to take care of. Pacing around some more, I kept looking towards the window. It hadn't been long since they left, but I expected their signal to come at any moment. After a few minutes of waiting, I began to grow more restless.

My bladder is a bit full.

As much as I didn't want to have to deal with it, this needs to be taken care of before I leave. The same issue as before irked me still. If I go out into the backyard, I could be wasting precious moments.

If I'm the only one here, then who will know?

A rather strange thought came to me as I realized what the most efficient thing would be. After all, the house is getting completely obliterated.

Nobody will ever know.

Unbuttoning my pants, I moved my buckler out of the way and began urinating on the kitchen floor. It was a strange sensation to do this in what was very recently our home, but the relief was rather nice. The only issue with this decision was that it didn't really go anywhere and instead pooled on the floor. As disgusting as this is, I suppose it's not my problem, or anyone's for that matter.

Walking out of the kitchen, I took one last look at the house as I walked back towards the couch. Even though I haven't been here for long, I'm going to miss the relative peace of living here.

What I wouldn't give to have a simpler life of working the fields, or even hunting, as opposed to this absurdity I've found myself in. I only realize it now, but I feel as though last night was more or less all I've really wanted. To be surrounded by those that accept me among them. To see them happy and safe. If I could relive such a time over and over, I wouldn't mind. Maybe at the end of the day it's not really freedom I want—

Boom

Far off in the distance there came a sudden deep boom that was unmistakable. This was the signal. Taking the firestriker out of my pocket, I ran over towards the fuse which had been left in the hallway. Having tied both the basement and room's fuses into one, it was rather fat and difficult to light. With shaking hands, I continuously struck the metal against the sparking stone, but it just wouldn't catch fire.

No time for fear.

The others might die if I take too long.

"Come on! Please!" I began yelling out loud as I practically banged the two things together. Every time I struck it, I flinched, almost half-expecting myself to be annihilated in an instant. Fighting off my fear, I lessened the intensity and increased the speed of my strikes before finally having a spark catch fire. Relieved by this, I began blowing on it carefully to ensure it spread to all the smaller lines. Once I was sure I'd completed my task, I ran over towards the door and looked back for a moment to ensure that it was still burning. Seeing the puffs of smoke coming from the fuse as it continued to burn, Rosalia's warning came to mind.

I can't afford to stay here any longer.

I hope this will be the last time I see this place.

With adrenaline surging through my veins, I flung open the door and immediately took to the sky. At first I did nothing but try to put as much distance between myself and the coming explosion as I could, however, I quickly realized this was a bad idea as I spotted other Soras in the distance. Not only was I exerting myself more than I needed to, I would also look incredibly suspicious if any of them saw me. Slowing down, I eventually began to cruise in the sky as though a disaster weren't about to happen.

Despite the increase in Soras patrolling due to the small explosion from the signal, none of them seemed to pay much attention to me. To them, I was just one of many who were investigating the cause of such an unnatural thing. My buckler might stand out, but during such responses armed guards aren't uncommon. As the fear began to leave me, I realized that there was a strange peace to be had up in the sky like this. I could have never imagined flying like this through the Academy in my

wildest dreams. Looking down below, I could finally see things I never noticed before. Buildings and pathways that were hidden from the main paths were suddenly revealed to me.

How many things still remain hidden to me about this place?

As the thought entered my mind, I also began to take note of how the pathways didn't really stretch on as long as I thought they had. The forest seemed to swallow much of the Academy. Only near important buildings was the forest really cleared. Seeing the endpoints of pathways I used to walk every day was a strange sight. Even stranger was being able to see both the white chapel and the main building at the same time. Was the Academy smaller than I believed, or am I simply not used to how small everything looks like from up here? As I flew over a clearing where they had been chopping down trees, a thought suddenly occurred to me.

I wonder where my sanctuary is.

Looking around, I could see the small squads of Soras investigating the area of the explosion. Rushing along the pathways, there were a few Toma as well. They still hadn't rung the alarm bells, but the Academy was definitely in a state of high alert considering what had occurred yesterday as well. As stupid of an idea as it was, I listened to the voice in my head urging me to take a small detour. It would take thirty seconds at most, and I had more than enough time. It was something I would never get the chance to do again.

As I climbed higher, I scanned around its approximate location. Despite it being a place I should have recognized instantly, I had some trouble finding it because in actuality it was much smaller than I ever realized. There was a good reason nobody ever visited it. From up here you'd have to be specifically looking for it to notice such an insignificant bare spot in the vast forest. Despite how puny it was, I felt a great sadness as I saw the lone log lying beneath my favorite shade tree. Bidding farewell, I climbed back higher into the sky before suddenly hearing a loud whistle come from behind.

Turning my head, I saw what was likely an Overseer coming over towards me. At this point, I couldn't pretend that I hadn't heard him. There was very little chance I'd be able to convince him of my innocence either as I didn't have the temporary armband of a guard, nor did I have a proper armband in the first place. Feeling the adrenaline come surging back, I knew my only option was to start rushing over towards the others before even more Soras began to chase me. Without another second of hesitation, I dove down just above the canopy to try and make it harder for onlookers to see me.

There was still some distance to the mountain prison and I had a decent lead on the Cog chasing me, but it would matter little if someone cut me off. Feeling around my waist, I felt the leather of my belt, however, underneath my jacket I touched the familiar material of my sling. Undoing it from my waist, I reached into the pocket where I stored my rocks and loaded it into the pouch. In order to catch my pursuer by surprise, I only did a half-swing as I flipped around and quickly slung it straight at him.

Although he'd been higher in altitude, in order to continue directing others to reinforce him, he wasn't far enough away to avoid my throw. As the stone hit him from below, his head snapped back and he clutched his eye. Letting out an anguished scream, his wings dissipated and he plummeted toward the ground.

Glad to see him gone, I reached for another stone to prepare myself once the others came. Just as my fingers touched the smooth surface of the next stone, I heard a projectile whiz right past my head. The way it barely touched the fabric of my hood made my blood run cold. Looking beside me, it seemed that the Overseer had been successful in summoning guards that were armed, some with slings and others with short blades. Taking one last look at the mountain, I made a mental note of what direction to head in and dove beneath the canopy. Right as I did, I heard the sound of stones smacking against the trees, making loud cracking sounds as splinters of wood exploded outward.

Gripping the sling in my hand, there was little I could do as swinging it was basically impossible while trying to dodge all the branches coming my way. With every near miss I could feel the twigs and small branches breaking against my buckler as I used it to cover most of my face. The guards seemed content with flying above the canopy and simply trying to hit me from above. At this rate, it seemed that more guards would come and I'd quickly be encircled and killed.

I'd taken my eyes off navigating for just a second to take note of the guards' positions and when I looked back I nearly flew straight into a tree. Making a harsh, last-second turn, I tumbled and fell to the forest floor. This was a mixed blessing as I managed to momentarily break their line of sight. Turning the opposite way, I flew back where I'd come from before taking a sudden left turn. My erratic movements seemed to confuse my pursuers for a moment, but it didn't take long until they found me again. Although it bought me a bit of time, this decision of mine had disorientated my sense of direction. I now wasn't sure if I was even heading in the right direction.

Am I going to die here?

Doubt began to plague my mind as I desperately tried to outrun the guards. By now I was beginning to grow tired. It would be a miracle if I somehow made it to my group from this horrible position I was in. More than likely, Rosalia's bomb is the only option I have left. I need to survive until it goes off.

Crack

I flinched as a rock splintered against the tree in front of me. I didn't even have to turn around to know that they were right above me again. More whistling came as the guards began to call for even more support. I knew that Rosalia said it would be eight minutes, but why does it feel like an eternity?

Can I survive much longer?

I shook off the thought as I continued to focus on my flying. Clearing my head, I kept my mind trained on avoiding their attacks and keeping my breathing under control. If there's any way to break their line of sight, I could perhaps retaliate against them a bit. I can't win against such numbers, but it

would cause them to hesitate in following me so closely. The issue I was mainly coming across was that, for the most part, there was nothing but trees. There had to be a building or some sort of structure I could perhaps hide in for a moment to catch my breath and surprise them from.

Or maybe they'll just surround me the moment I—

There was a dull thud followed by an intense pain that nearly knocked me once again to the forest floor. One of the Sora had finally managed to get a hit in. It had hit my back, and although I wasn't sure if it had broken anything, it left such an intense stinging and numbness that I feared it had. Realizing that perhaps they'd gotten too close, I turned back just in time to reflexively raise my shield and block a rock that would have hit my face. In my attempt to dodge more that came after, I dove back down to the ground once more and changed my direction.

Unlike before, the guards dove down as well and came fairly close to grabbing me. At the last moment, I leapt into the air and gave everything I had to fly above the canopy. I would have likely been stoned to death by those waiting above had the guards that dove after me not stuck so closely. In a twist of luck, they were acting as a sort of shield for me.

By now, I was starting to lose the color in my vision as I was pushing my body to its absolute limit. Any moment, I knew they'd catch me, and yet from the corner of my eye I saw something that almost seemed like an illusion at first. In the distance, almost as if a second sun had erupted from the earth, a ball of fire rose into the sky sending trees and soil flying into the air along with globs of fire. Knowing what would come next, I dissipated my wings and pretended to fall as if I'd been hit. The guards, too distracted by what they were seeing, lagged behind as they didn't focus on chasing a boy who was plunging to his death over watching what they likely believed to be something divine taking place.

Falling limply to the ground, I brought my wings back out at the last moment possible to break my fall. Immediately ducking behind a tree, I placed my hands over my ears and barely a second after felt the tree and ground itself shake as the invisible force wreaked havoc on everything around me. Branches, fragments of wood, leaves, and all sorts of other debris fell from above, but that wasn't the end of it. Many of the Sora that had been chasing me were also violently tossed from the sky and onto the forest floor. As they plummeted, their bodies either crashed into tree branches or slammed straight into the ground with such force that their limp bodies bounced upwards for a moment upon impact. All save for one were unmoving. As I quickly got to my feet, I could see the injured Sora writhing in pain on the floor from what I could guess were broken bones.

In an instant, all of these warriors had been reduced to debris by something they could have never fathomed until today. The explosion was so otherworldly, that had I not known it came from Rosalia, I too would have sworn it to be divine intervention. Then again, just as the Shepherdess had promised, the knowledge I had obtained from her intervention had saved my life once more. Thanking the *Gods* for saving me, I looked around for any more signs of danger as I caught my breath.

As far as I could tell, my pursuers were either too distracted or too injured to continue chasing me, if they were even alive. Although I wanted to sit down and rest, I knew the best option would be to get back to my companions. Flying upwards, I poked my head above the canopy to see where the mountain prison was. To my shock, it was further than before I'd dove beneath the canopy. This meant that not only had I been flying in circles, but I had actually been going back towards the explosion. I suppose that's why it was powerful enough to knock all those Sora from the sky.

Taking a mental note of where to go once more, I did the sensible thing of flying beneath the canopy instead of out in the open as I had before. Like flocks of birds, I could vaguely see the sky filling with Soras as the alarm bells began to ring. More whistling came and my heart stopped for a moment, but I soon realized that these whistles were coming from all over and didn't seem to be signalling me but rather orders to reinforce. They were in a state of panic due to the fires and the explosion itself. Any attempt to look for an escapee was likely considered less important than saving the Academy itself. With the amount of fires, injuries, and structural damage from the explosion, I had the perfect cover to move undetected.

Smelling the burning oil, I looked up to the sky in fear but was greeted with... well, nothing. The smoke stung my throat a bit, but it wasn't nearly as thick as before. Seeing Rosalia's explosion work just as planned felt even more unbelievable than the shock I felt during the demonstration. In a strange way, I almost felt a sense of pride. My friend had truly done something I thought impossible and having helped, I shared in that accomplishment. Without either of us, this outcome would have never been possible. An entire organization of soldiers and fanatics had been brought to their knees by a group of only five. I couldn't wait to see the look on her face.

In my absentmindedness, I nearly missed the figures waving to me frantically. Just as Maia had said, they were waiting for me at the edge of the forest within a short running distance to the base of the mountain. "Captain!" Rosalia cried out as she leapt towards me the moment I was close enough for her to grab. Pulling me out of the air, I fell to the ground as I had little strength left. My injury was rather painful, but I ignored it as my friend held me in a tight embrace while rubbing her hooded face against my chest. "You scared me when you didn't come back in time... I'm glad you're okay."

For a moment I didn't know how to react as the others were watching. The relief and happiness I felt while having the adrenaline dump from my body nearly made me tear up. It was such an intense swelling of emotion that I could barely contain it. Saving me from embarrassing myself, Maia pulled Rosalia off of me.

"Let's save the theatrics for later. For now, let's let our firebug have a chance to catch his breath." Kneeling down next to me, she extended her hand. "Nice job, kid."

The second she began pulling me up, the sharp pain from my injury caused me to flinch. Noticing this, Maia stopped, but it was Reko who called the injury to everyone's attention. "You are bleeding. What happened?"

“Ah...” I was a bit embarrassed that I’d been injured yet again. “One of the guards managed to hit me with their sling. I don’t think it’s that serious—”

“Really? Does it hurt?” Rosalia quickly went to examine my wound but lacked the knowledge to say anything other than, “Ouch, it tore right through your uniform and it looks sort of nasty.”

Before I could respond, Maia laid me down with my back facing towards her. “Let’s get this treated before we move. Senga, get over here.”

With some help from Senga, the two of them removed my jacket so that they could treat the injury. Not only had my new uniform been ripped, but a chunk of my skin had apparently been taken along with it as well. I was surprised to see Senga working alongside Maia, it seemed as though she’d been teaching her some things in their time together. The two of them cleaned my wound and Maia determined that the best thing to do would be to bandage it for now as any stitchings could easily rip given the task ahead of us. I noticed that throughout the process, Rosalia had her back turned to us. She seemed to have a hard time dealing with any amount of bloodshed in general.

Feeling a cold substance touch my skin out of nowhere, I jumped slightly before being chastised by Maia for overreacting. Although I wasn’t sure if it was the same kind of medicine as before, Maia informed me that this would help stop the bleeding as well as numb the area for a while. Once she finished applying it, the wound was sealed with a bandage that Senga wrapped herself under Maia’s instruction.

“Is it too tight?” Senga suddenly asked as she was close to finishing.

“Uh, It’s fine, thank you.” It was always a bit awkward to speak with her, especially when she was this close to me. It always made my heart race a bit, but in this moment there was another reason for that as well.

If things had gone the same as before, we’d be dead by now.

Looking up at the sun, I knew that what came after would be completely unknown to me. We were now living through a day that was never meant for us.

When will I speak with the Shepherdess again?

As much as I enjoyed my brief time with her, a part of me also never wanted to see her again. I hope she understands this feeling of mine. As long as we remained within the Academy’s grasp, however, there was a good chance I might not be able to avoid this possibility. Adding to that, even if I’m not the one to fall, it could be any of us. Previously, Senga had been the first to die.

If she were the only one to die this time, would I be willing to go through it all again to save her?

“Is there something wrong?”

I looked to Senga who had finished bandaging me. She seemed to be staring at my hands which were noticeably shaking. “O-Oh, there’s nothing wrong! I’m just a bit tired and the adrenaline is leaving my body. Don’t worry yourself over it.” She seemed suspicious but didn’t press me any further. As she helped me put on my jacket, Maia went over our plan for the next part of our escape.

“Once we leave this safe zone there will be an open field. I want you all to stay close and keep pace. Everyone is already familiar with where we’re going except you, kid... Well, at least not *formally*.”

“You’ve managed a way to get everyone inside?” I asked, confused as to what exactly she was trying to say. “I’m not sure I understand how you’ll be sneaking us in. They’ll notice my armband.”

“Well, you hit the nail on the head with what the problem is going to be. They’re strict with who can come and go. I’ve already entered Rosalia and Senga into their logs. Reko is a Champion, which means they’re not going to stop him from entering. The issue comes down to you and your stolen identity. We can’t necessarily just take you through the front normally.”

“Then how am I going to escape this place?”

“Oh, trust me, you’re going to be leaving with us... Just not in the normal way.”

“I don’t follow. That doesn’t explain anything.”

“We need a way to get our supplies and weapons through, right? Even with Reko and I here, the guards will stop us because the Academy is in the middle of an emergency. We’re going to look suspicious carrying all these supplies. That’s why we have to get creative. Technically, number seven-nineteen is still considered missing. People go missing all the time, but usually they’re found once they try to escape. Those who we never find are assumed to have committed suicide or died somewhere within the forests of the Academy. We’ve discussed this before so I’ll cut to the chase. You’re going to be playing the part of our *recently found fugitive* who’s been caught with a false identification number, stolen weapons, and suspected of being connected with the explosion.”

“Will... I be fine?”

“You should be. If you’ve got a better idea, then I’m all ears, but it’s not as risky as it sounds. I’ve been planning this for a while now and I’m the one who knows this place the best. The issue related to our weapons will be handled by Reko. He’s one of the select few who’s in charge of overseeing the armory as well as some storage areas as part of his duties. It’s why he’s been so helpful in getting us our supplies. He’ll be confiscating the weaponry so that he can *temporarily* lock it up in the prison’s armory due to the current chaos. Senga and Rosalia are going to be playing the part of my assistants who are carrying other materials that are crucial to my work.

We were escaping the fires when we came across this suspicious figure who happened to be using an identification number of a new recruit. Since new recruits had their numbers changed recently, I noticed this discrepancy and had Reko detain you. Now we’re going to the prison so that I can *interrogate* you, Reko can *secure* the weapons in the guard’s armory, and the two girls are coming along to carry my things and help me *set up* a temporary office here since the Academy is currently unsafe. To make it really clear for someone like you, none of this is really going to happen, it’s our cover. Not like you’re going to do any talking, but I want everyone to be on the same page because I can’t afford you doing something stupid.”

The others were silent as they seemed to be processing the details of her plan. From the look of things, she hadn't told anyone the full details until now. While the intricacy and steps taken to set it up were impressive, there was an issue that seemed apparent to me.

"What happens if the guards are suspicious of your story? There's a lot of coincidences, such as most of your important supplies being intact and happening to come across a potential culprit on the way here. Isn't that all too convenient?"

She quickly waved away my concern by stating, "None of the guards are going to dare question me. If an Overseer happens to be there, I'll handle them."

"Do you outrank the Overseers?"

"It's... complicated."

"Don't we have a right to know? Especially after everything we've been through?"

She hesitated for a moment before finally giving in. "Houses are only given to people who hold offices in the Academy. I'm the assistant to the head of a *special* sect of research here in the Academy. So yes, I'm *important* enough that most of you underlings wouldn't want to mess with me. That being said, Overseers are a pain in the ass because of their special permissions. They're technically not supposed to bother me unless absolutely necessary, but they tend to be overambitious dogs that are too eager to prove their worth. If they're stupid enough to try and stop us, I'll make them regret it. That goes for any other potential encounter as well. I'll be speaking for our group; the rest of you stay quiet."

I looked to the others to see if they'd say anything, but since none of us had any better alternatives, we were left with this far fetched story as our only means of entering the prison. Right as I was getting up, Maia put her hand on my shoulder and made me sit back down on the floor.

"Where do you think you're going?" Before I could respond, she reached into her pack and pulled out a length of rope.

"Maia?" Despite not being able to see her face, I could tell she was smiling beneath it. Quickly calling for Reko, she had him pin me down.

"Wait! Why are you—" Rosalia yelled before Maia shushed her.

"We need to make him look like he's been captured, right? We can't just have him walk alongside us. You want to help us, sweetie? If you come and learn how to do this, then you can try it on him the next time he does something that pisses you off." She began laughing at her own joke while Reko apologized as he forced my arm back so that Maia could tie it to my foot.

"Is it really necessary to tie me up like this? Can't you just do it normally?" I asked as I struggled in vain against the Toma's ridiculously strong grip.

"This way of tying a person is meant to make them uncomfortable, immobile, and to humiliate them. It's more believable if I do this to you... Plus, when will we get the chance to do this again?" Maia answered, trying to justify her actions.

By now I should have suspected such things from her, but as I turned my head, I felt betrayal as I saw Rosalia intently watching. Despite her initial reluctance, her curiosity had clearly been piqued. I'm assuming she was interested in knots and forms of tying with rope... I hope.

"Does it have to be that tight?" She asked, attempting to have Maia loosen my restraint.

"It needs to be done properly." Almost as if to punish me for Rosalia's question, she tightened the rope to the point where my wrist felt as though it were going to be crushed. "If we half-ass it, and they notice, it'll just make things more difficult."

Rosalia turned to me, and despite my own concern, I tried to alleviate her worry. "I'll be fine. It's only for a while after all."

Almost as if taking this as permission, she suddenly stepped closer to Maia and asked, "Can I try?" To my shock, Maia was serious in teaching her and soon enough my arms and legs were bound behind my back.

"Huh, you're quite the fast learner, aren't you?" My irritation at Maia praising Rosalia for doing this to me must have somehow been apparent as she suddenly seemed to remember to check on me. "Your injury isn't giving you too much trouble, is it?"

"Let's just get this over with." My annoyance was quite clear to everyone involved.

"Good. Not like we were going to stop anyway." She came closer and pinched my cheek through my hood. "Don't worry, it'll be over before you know it!"

Reko began to lift me, and thankfully it wasn't as painful as I expected. He gave his extra pack, which was supposed to be mine, to Rosalia and Senga to carry between them. Despite this, he still carried his own pack, the weapons, and myself. It's not surprising that a Toma is strong, but Reko is a monster of a different breed. He had me slung over his left shoulder which is where I got to watch Rosalia and Senga struggle to carry all three packs between the two of them. Despite their trouble, Maia didn't attempt to slow down. For our sake, I hope this is simply her trying to keep up appearances and not a look into what traveling with her is going to be like.

With nothing to do, I stared up at the sky. Despite there being so many Soras flying around, none stopped to question us. I suppose this is the kind of special treatment you get when you have a Champion that's clearly fully geared. It's likely also helping that we're walking out in the open. Nobody would suspect that we're trying to escape when we're nonchalantly making our way towards the prison.

Watching the smoke continue to fill the sky, I began to wonder just how much damage we actually did to this place. Despite lessening the amount of explosives used, there still seemed to be a great deal of devastation. I doubt they ever had a plan for an internal attack of this scale now that I see how chaotic everything is. From what I can tell, it seems as if the strict command structure and processes we were drilled to follow have fallen apart to some degree due to how quickly and violently our attack occurred. Whether or not the explosion killed that many people, the manpower of the Cogs

was focused on trying to contain the fires along with trying to re-establish control of the low ranks who were directionless and potentially even a danger now that there was a real chance to escape amidst the chaos.

Among the Soras that were darting back and forth were several who simply hovered in place above them all. I could only assume these were Overseers that were watching for any escapees. Perhaps they were issuing orders as well, but they seemed to be on-edge in a way I'd never seen before. In their hands they openly displayed their weapons as if daring any below to step out of line.

As shocking as all of this was to see, I was even more caught off-guard when I realized a smile had formed on my face. A part of me was genuinely delighted to see this place burning. They deserved it after everything they'd done to me. In many ways I'd finally gotten my revenge... but is it sinful to take so much delight in this? After all, we were taking the lives of many who may be innocent in all of this.

Have I always been this twisted?

Biting my tongue to rid myself of the smile, I managed to quickly take a look in the direction we were going. Based on how I was tied, it was difficult to do, but I managed to catch a glimpse of an incredible thing. Until now, I've never seen the entrance of the mountain prison. Based on what I saw, the entrance appeared to be the mouth of a very large cave that stretched so high that the massive wooden walls surrounding it only reached halfway up. This seemed strange, considering Sora could just fly through it easily, but as we got closer I took another look and saw why this was the case. The entrance was barred by rods of metal meaning that the only way in or out would be through a section we couldn't yet see. Approaching the outer walls, a guard called out to us.

"Halt!" Commanding us from a watchtower there appeared to be a Sora with a crossbow in his hands. He had been the first to spot us, but by now other guards were beginning to appear atop the wall. The Sora seemed to hesitate but soon addressed Reko, "Sir, apologies but we've been instructed to not let in or out a single soul until the—"

"I am Maia Kristen, honored guest of this Academy." Maia suddenly stepped in front of Reko, the golden design of her armband was in clear view of the tower guard.

He hesitated before replying, "I did not receive word that a Maia Kristen would be arriving. My orders are to—"

Reaching into her hood, Maia pulled out a necklace made of gold. Shimmering in the light, it caught the guard and I by surprise. "I have a request to make and you shall not deny me." Commanded Maia.

"A gilded cog held by an honored guest... I didn't know—What is your request, Ma'm?" The guard replied with a bit of fear in his voice.

"My home has been destroyed in the attack and I am demanding that you allow us inside for protection along with the research and materials I possess. They cannot be allowed to fall into the

hands of our attackers. Accompanying me is a Champion of the Gods, number *ten-thousand two-hundred and eighty eight*. I am also joined by numbers *one-thousand and thirty-two* as well as *one-thousand five-hundred and twenty-five* who are both recently arrived foreigners who I have been studying. At the present, they are assisting me in evacuating my supplies to a temporary residence inside the prison. Their entries have been previously logged and my research on them is still underway.”

“Ma’m, I understand, but—You must understand that outside weapons are not permitted. I must ask why you carry so many and who the individual is that the Champion has retrained on his shoulder. Are these items related to the attack?”

“Yes, you’re correct in your assumption. He was apprehended on the way here due to his highly suspicious behavior. Failure to stop and identify, possession of multiple stolen arms and supplies, failure to comply with given orders, and he even assaulted our Champion when confronted. While my assistants set up my new office, I will be interrogating him. Finding out how many are involved in this attack, and potentially any future plans they may have, is crucial to the Academy’s safety.”

The Sora turned to look at the other guards below him. There was a clear conflict between what they had been told to do and what Maia had just informed them of. The inaction of the other guards lead the Sora to timidly state once more, “I understand the importance of your mission... but we are not permitted to—”

“I know what you’ve been told to do, but I’m giving you a new order. This gate is to be opened immediately or I’ll make sure each and every one of you is executed for insubordination. Interrogating this individual and securing this sensitive research material far supersedes a generic order to secure a position. Now tell me, are you going to open this gate *right now* or should I have the Champion break it down and start the executions himself?”

The calmness in which she delivered it was perhaps even more frightening than if she had yelled it like most other high ranking members would. The threats seemed to hit home with the guard as he quickly quieted one of the others that attempted to speak up. Apologizing to Maia, he personally ordered for the gate to be opened. Quite oddly though, the other guards refused to move as if the conflicting orders and threats had frozen them in place. There was an awkward stillness as they refused to do as they were told. I could feel Reko growing impatient and just as Maia was about to speak, he stepped forward. Letting the supply packs and myself fall to the ground. I was left dazed, but managed to see as he sprinted right up to the gate and rammed it with his shoulder. Despite the size of the structure, he managed to cause it to shake which sent a palpable wave of panic in the guards that broke their normally emotionless demeanor. In only one strike, several logs had bent and cracked. It seemed entirely possible that he could bring the entire gate down if he kept ramming into it.

Instead of doing so, however, Reko stretched out his hand and rested it on the gate, slowly putting his weight onto it. The sound of the wood beginning to splinter further spurred the panic of the guards and caused the Sora in the tower to finally abandon his post. Flying down from his tower, he

personally began helping to open the gate while yelling for the others to do the same. Despite the gate already being in the process of opening, Reko pushed on it from the outside and sped up the process. Walking over and picking me, as well as the supplies, off the ground, he joined Maia and walked through the gate with the two girls scurrying behind them. Some of the guards were on the floor as they'd fallen from the gate suddenly slamming into them. Just as they were trying to get back on their feet, they froze in place upon seeing the giant Champion up close. Stepping in front of Reko, Maia singled out the Sora from before.

"Guard, is there anyone manning the lift?"

"No Ma'm, the lift is cold."

"Then it better be hot by the time we get there. We need to go to the upper ring. I have business to take care of before setting up my temporary office."

"But M'am, wouldn't it be better to send the others away first? That section is—"

"Do I have to show the others what happens to a disobedient Cog?"

"N-No M'am! The lift will be operational immediately!" He shouted before saluting and flying back up to the relative safety of his tower. Barking orders and organizing those down below, he scrambled them to start getting the lift ready. It seemed he was forbidden from leaving the watchtower, but more than that, he appeared to simply be a coward. Based on his reactions and position, he also seemed to be an older member of the Academy that never rose that high in his ranking.

As I was taken into their small outpost, I saw that there were wooden buildings that were likely serving as storage for supplies or even as barracks. Unlike the guards who patrolled the rest of the Academy, these guards were properly armed with swords, spears, and ranged weapons, like the guard in the tower. I understood that this was the entrance to the prison, but why did the Academy feel the need to protect this area more than the others? Their paranoia caused the other guards to only be armed with daggers, slings, and maybe short swords at most. Was the risk of escape so high that they needed this level of caution?

The guards kept a close eye on us, but quite frankly, it mostly seemed to mostly focus on Reko. We all knew how strong the Champions were supposed to be, but I suppose seeing one up close and having the threat of him killing you warranted this reaction. It was incredibly rare to ever see one up close, and I suppose Reko more than lived up to the tales surrounding their abilities.

As we neared the prison's entrance, I noticed that the metal bars I'd seen earlier were fairly rusted. Although the rest of the Academy didn't have large metal structures like this, it also didn't seem to be of the same quality as the other pre-war structures. Had the Academy deemed it necessary to use so much metal for this structure, or was there another explanation for this?

The iron bars extended all the way to the floor until they buried themselves beneath the ground. The only part that defied this coverage was the metal gate that was built oddly small and seemed to only open from the outside. There were multiple locks that needed to be released in order

for the gate to be free to slide open. Another strange aspect were the sharpened metal protrusions on both sides of the gate so that you weren't able to grab it save for a few sets of handles.

Once the guards were done unlocking the gate, the Tomas of the group each grabbed a handle and pulled it open. Due to how low the entrance was, the Soras had to crouch down to fit through, while the Tomas had to crawl on their bellies. Since I was tied, I got to experience how prisoners were transported. Reko tossed me on the ground by the entrance and the guards that were already inside dragged me across the rocky floor. Were it not for my hood, my face would have been scraped along the ground. The drop itself had already been painful enough, but when they dragged me through, the way they yanked my arms caused me to cry out in pain.

"Sir, would you like for me to carry him?" A Toma guard asked while holding me in the air.

"I will carry it." Reko quickly crawled through the entrance and snatched me from the guard, saving me from any further pain.

Before closing the gate, the guards outside passed lit torches to the ones escorting us. Although the entrance itself was well lit by the sun, you only needed to walk about twenty paces for the light to quickly fade to near pitch black. The ground also slowly transitioned from its rocky natural form to one of smooth stone quite similar to that found in the auditorium. When I noticed the similarities, I looked up to see that the walls were inscribed with words. The only issue is that I was too far away, and constantly having my head bob up and down with every step Reko took.

Upon reaching the main room of the prison, my suspicions that it was made by the same people who created the auditorium were basically confirmed. It was just as obscenely large, however, this one felt as though it was closer to being finished in comparison to the auditorium. The same tree-like pillars were present here, however, they weren't smooth and featureless, quite the opposite. These pillars were carved with figures of people, or perhaps even the Gods themselves. The only issue was that everything in here was damaged.

The carved figures were missing heads, arms, or sometimes even the majority of their bodies. The floor was covered in scratches, some of them deep enough that you'd likely trip if you weren't paying attention, which almost happened to the girls who were still struggling with the supplies. One thing I noticed, however, instantly brought back unpleasant memories. It was the freezing temperature of this place. Despite the surprising amount of sunlight that came in from somewhere above, it was bitterly cold here and still somewhat dark.

Suddenly snatching the torch from a Sora, Maia began barking orders. "Go with the others and help them operate the lift. I don't need an escort."

"Ma'm, would you like for me to secure the weapons the Champion has brought?"

"No, that can be taken care of later." Thinking quickly on her feet she added, "I need to interrogate this boy and see who gave him access to these arms. I may need to examine the weapons for my investigation. Adding to that, I need all of this to be kept as confidential as possible which is why we

need the privacy of the restricted section. Tell the other guards to not alert anyone as to what has happened or that I'm here. We may have traitors in our midst."

Seeming to buy into his *special task*, the guard dutifully nodded. "I understand, Ma'm." He had only made it a few paces before suddenly turning back. "Wait M'am, does this mean I should keep this from the Warden as well? You know how he is, he doesn't like—"

"Yes. I know you report to him, but I have reason to suspect him as well. The recent escape and fires leading up to this attack have been very suspicious. Until we have more information on what is happening, I'm ordering you to keep this exchange a secret. Once I've extracted the information from this boy and cleared his name, I will inform the Warden myself of what has happened."

"I understand, Ma'm, but there's an issue."

"Then hurry and report it to me. You're wasting my time."

"How are we going to explain the gate being damaged?"

Maia let out a frustrated sigh and began walking away. "I don't know, just say it got damaged in the blast or something! Do I have to give you a detailed plan, including every time you need to take a breath as well? Maybe I do since you Cogs take everything so literally... Whatever the case, I've given you your new orders, so unless it's important don't bother me again."

The frightened guard bowed his head and quickly ran off to catch up with the others who were preparing the lift. Finally seeing the thing itself, I recognized that it was a smaller version of what I'd seen at the auditorium. While the other one could hold over fifty people, this one seemed to be made for about ten at most. It was also built more like a box instead of a platform, but at the very least it was still made of metal. Before stepping inside, there was a small gate that needed to be opened. There wasn't a lock on it and instead it seemed like something you could open and close freely to prevent people from falling out once it started moving.

As we waited for the lift to start, I noticed that Senga seemed a bit nervous. The way she couldn't keep still seemed odd as I'd never seen her like this before. All at once, the giant gears began to turn somewhere and a tiny yelp came from her before quickly being suppressed with her hand. Due to how the prison was shaped, it reverberated all around. Turning around to look straight at Senga, Maia's disapproval seemed to ooze through her face covering. She tried her best to hide her fright, but from the way she tightly gripped the strap on the extra pack they carried, along with her seemingly doing the same to the metal railing that went around the box, it wasn't hard to surmise that she was terrified of heights.

The higher it ascended, the more her legs began to shake. It was such a departure from her usual seriousness that it was rather amusing. Even so, I began to wonder how she became scared of heights in the first place. She's a Sora after all, isn't she? It made little sense for her to be like this. Would it not be like a fish frightened of water?

As the lift entered the first ring-like floor that could be seen from below, it suddenly became dark for a moment before the floor revealed itself. Since this wasn't our stop, we slowly passed it and repeated the cycle for the next floors. The lift didn't move very fast, so I had ample time to realize that these floors were where the prisoners were held. While I was lying on the floor, I remember hearing and feeling a rumbling coming from below and then moving past me. Now I understood what this strange sensation was. Feeling Reko shift me off his shoulder, he slid me down his arm and onto the floor. I was confused for a moment, but soon felt him untying me.

"I'm not complaining about being freed, but won't this be an issue if we run across other guards?"

"And how will they know that you're supposed to be a prisoner?" Maia replied in a mocking tone.

"My armband—"

"The only way up is this lift. Even a Sora can't make it up or down if the lift is blocking the way. Adding to that, the floor we're going to isn't heavily guarded." I remained quiet and instead stretched since my joints felt incredibly stiff from the awkward way I'd been carried. Ruining my enjoyment, Maia suddenly shoved something towards me. "Take your sword and grab your pack from the girls. We had those daggers Reko brought tied to them since we weren't planning on fighting. That being said, if it comes down to it, you're probably better off sticking to that instead of the sword given how tight the hallways are going to be. Wouldn't hurt for the girls to have something to defend themselves either."

"Won't they immediately know something is wrong if they see us armed?" I asked as I passed Rosalia two daggers due to her sister still clutching the rail for dear life.

"There's a chance the guard below was lying to us and the Warden is still here. If that's the case they might try and surprise us. It's also possible we'll just run across some random people on the way out. Either way, it'll be easier to kill them then try and talk our way out. We have the advantage of surprise after all." As we passed another floor, Maia's voice lowered. "If we come across the Warden, I want him dead. That man is dangerous. He's one of my people... and an absolute demon in the flesh of a man. We'd be doing the world a favor by removing him from it."

Didn't the Shepherdess warn me of this man?

Thinking back to our meeting, I seem to remember her promising to tell me of this man after I had accepted her covenant. Had she genuinely forgotten or was that a lie? I couldn't tell which possibility was worse. Curious about why Maia hated this man so much, I tried to dig deeper.

"What has he done that makes him so bad?"

"There's too much to say, but to put it simply, he's responsible for everything you're about to see... The top floor is coming up, so stay quiet and make sure to pay attention to your little friend since

you won't see much from the rear. We have to go single file since the hallways are tight. Her job will be to alert you if anything's coming. It'll be up to you to protect us if needed."

As the lift began to slow down, there was a tense silence as we prepared ourselves for what might come. So far, each floor has been fairly similar. They were dark and mostly lit by candles and the occasional torch. There would be a few visible cells, but it was hard to guess as to how many there were in total per floor. Considering each floor was a circle around the mountain, with a large chunk of the middle being empty so that the lift and some sunlight could come through, I would say that this place could likely hold hundreds, perhaps even more if multiple people were stuffed into each cell.

As the lift came to a stop, however, it was immediately apparent that this area was different from the rest. It had a much higher ceiling and seemed to be about the size of two floors put together. The greatest difference, however, was the nearly complete lack of any light. There were no torches or openings for sunlight to come through outside of the opening provided by the lift where the sun was the brightest of any spot so far. It created an odd effect of almost blinding you as your eyes had to adjust to the severe darkness you were about to enter.

The rest of my group stepped off the platform one by one until I finally followed behind Rosalia, dagger firmly in hand. As my eyes took a second to adjust, I thought I was seeing specks of light from having looked up at the sun briefly, however, I soon realized this wasn't the source of this strange visual. Instead, the source came from simple oil lamps which dotted small crevices that were etched into the walls. The light they provided wasn't sufficient to show you the room itself. All that you could see were floating lights that served as guides to show you the different pathways and walls of this section. The torch that Maia carried was by far the brightest thing in this entire place, but Reko blocked most of it and it faded into barely a wisp by the time it reached me.

Since the room was a circle, there were realistically only two paths to head down. I found it odd that we chose to go on the left path, but I assume there was a reason for it. We walked in silence for some time until we abruptly stopped as the sound of a thud and metal clanging against the floor reverberated through the hallway. Wondering what had happened, I tried peering forward and managed to catch sight of Reko walking up to the body of the person he'd just dispatched and yanking his sword out of his back. A nearly silent groan came out, almost like a gasp, before silence returned to the hallway. The way he'd managed to do it so silently, despite his massive size, was honestly terrifying. I never thought that someone like him could move so quietly. Regardless of my awe, I readied my dagger and anxiously kept looking over my shoulder in case my turn came next.

Passing over the body, the quiet whispers of Senga and Rosalia could be heard as they tried not to step on his corpse or the blood that leaked out of him. From the way he died, I can only assume that Reko had thrown his blade at him. It's not exactly something we were taught, but I suppose it works. One thing I noticed as I passed over him, however, was that this Cog wasn't armed. He didn't even appear to have a dagger on him. What exactly is this floor supposed to be?

My pondering was disrupted by the fact that I could feel his blood sticking to my boots' soles. Quite a large amount of blood had managed to pool around him, almost as if his heart were still pumping it out of his body. As disgusted as I was, I realized that Rosalia was fighting her urge to gag by using her hood to cover her nose and eyes, relying mainly on her hearing to guide her forward instead. It was a rather interesting way to overcome her weakness, but I feel as though blood is something we're all going to have to get used to. Hearing the sound of our feet stick and then unstick to the floor was a rather grim reminder of the blood we spilled just to get here.

Not noticing anyone behind us, I looked forward briefly to see that the lights lining the wall had suddenly vanished. In their place, came a series of metal doors with candles that lit the sides of each one. It appeared as though every door had a number painted onto it due to having no way to see into them, unlike the holding cells that had small barred windows. The numbering system they used was the holy one, *which only aroused even more curiosity* out of me. Passing by eight doors, we finally stopped on one that had *IX* on it. Moving aside, Maia stood in front of it. This ninth room seemed to be the one we came here for.

"When I open this door, there's going to be a large room. Follow my exact footsteps as closely as possible. Don't touch anything and don't make any noise. No matter what you see, don't say a thing. You *absolutely* must not say a thing."

The fact that she had to emphasize this so much made me fear what awaited us inside. Gripping the dagger tightly in my hand, I took a quick look back before watching as Maia approached the door. Taking a key from one of the pouches on her waist, she inserted it into the door itself. Unlike the wooden ones, this one seemed to have a lock built inside of it. There was a slight clanking as she turned the key before the door suddenly opened inward by itself. For a second I was confused until I saw that the air rushing in from outside nearly extinguished the torch. Leading us inside, Maia suddenly stopped and motioned for me to close the door, after doing so, the air in the room became incredibly still. In fact, everything here was so still and quiet it felt as though time itself had stopped. It wasn't quite on the level of what I experienced while dead, but it was as close as I've come to it while alive.

Lifting the torch high into the sky, she motioned for Reko to take the torch and copy her. Upon doing so, more of the room became illuminated. What we saw was truly unexpected to the point where I had to look around multiple times to make sure I wasn't imagining it. At no point did I ever imagine that we'd be walking into a giant area filled with rows of people. I wondered why Maia was so adamant about showing this to us.

Is this what she was alluding to this whole time?

As the light touched the faces of those who slept on the beds, they began to murmur. Looking more closely, they were exceptionally young. Even more so that the generation of Cog that I was surrounded by when I awoke. This must be the newest generation that Maia had alluded to.

Why do they all seem to be younger than ten years of age?

They weren't dressed as Academy members and instead had the same type of rags I had woken up with. They also weren't lying down but instead tied to beds similar to those in the barracks. Blindfolded and gagged, they laid there motionless. Occasionally, some would move and make noises as though they were having nightmares, but it only lasted a few seconds. It was as though they were stuck in a forced sleep.

Is this how they erase our minds?

Is this the curse or something else entirely?

We were all horrified at what we were seeing. From the way the others froze in place, I could tell that Maia was the only one that had ever been inside of this room. Out of all of us, Reko seemed to be the most affected by what we saw. I could see his hand shaking by the light of the torch alone. The difference between us, however, was that he didn't seem to be frightened. He was seething with rage.

"What is this?" He sternly called out to Maia, trying to keep his voice low despite his anger showing in his slight growl.

"Be quiet! I'll tell you when we're outside." Maia answered in a panicked whisper.

"You never said it was like this..." Reko began walking closer to her in a threatening manner which forced Maia to back away.

"Shh, if you keep talking—"

Bumping into one of the beds, the boy who was laying on it suddenly began to violently struggle against his restraints. Through his exertion, he managed to partially dislodge the gag from his mouth and in a muffled voice he began to scream.

"Help! HEEEEELP MEEE! Maamaa! MAAAMAAA!"

Reko pushed Maia aside and desperately began trying to untie the boy. As he did, however, the child suddenly stopped screaming and began to convulse. Shocked, Reko hesitated for a moment before ripping off the boy's blindfold and gag, however, this didn't seem to improve the situation. The boy's eyes were wide and had a crazed look about them. He didn't blink a single time as though he were seeing something so horrifying that he'd been turned to stone. His breathing turned to incredibly short pants that soon ceased altogether. As Reko lifted the boy's head and placed his ear to his small mouth, it was apparent that he heard nothing. Dropping to his knees, the torch fell from his hand and rolled away, still burning. Slowly, he placed the boy back down on the bed and stared away from the light into the abyss.

Giving us no time to process what we just saw, a wave of similar violent reactions began to spread around the room. All around us, the children began screaming hysterically all at once, forming a horrifying cacophony of screeches the likes of which surpassed any depiction of hell I was ever taught of. Rosalia ran over to Senga and they held each other out of sheer terror. Utterly stunned by the scene before me, I could barely draw breath as I struggled to understand what was happening.

Fighting their restraints, the children shook their beds, causing the metal of the frames to slam against the stone floors. The screeching of the metal against the stone and their own shrieking likely lasted less than a minute and yet it felt like an eternity. At first a few stopped, but then all at once, they ceased their screaming and the room returned to complete silence. The quiet sobbing of both Rosalia and Senga were the only things that interrupted the stillness of the dead.

Unable to come to terms with what I just saw, it was Reko's outburst that finally snapped me back into sanity. Suddenly leaping towards Maia, he grabbed her by the throat and lifted her into the air. "Maia." He quietly whispered as though the children were still sleeping. "I will repay you today by giving you chance to speak. If you lie to me again... I will kill you."

"Okay." Maia groaned out before being dropped to the floor. Coughing, she rubbed her neck as she tried to get back to her feet. Using the bed of one of the children to finally stand, she couldn't help but stare at the dead child before looking over the entire room filled with now lifeless bodies. Hanging her head, she leaned on the bed frame to keep her from falling back down.

"I'm so sorry." She said aloud, her voice wavering as though she were on the brink of tears. It was hard to be certain who the apology was meant for.

Reko turned his back to her and let out an angry grunt as he adjusted his face covering. Turning to the girls, I walked over and gently shook them as they were still tightly clinging to each other, frozen in place.

"Come on, it's... I think it's over now."

Senga slowly took her hands off the top of Rosalia's hood, where she had likely been covering her ears, and they proceeded to wipe their tears. Picking up the torch from the floor, Reko waited for Maia to walk in front of him. We were now wary of following Maia, but she was the only one who knew the way out. As such, Reko acted as a sort of barrier between us.

At the other end of the room was a similar door to the one at the entrance. As we waited for Maia to unlock it, none of us dared to look behind. Once again, the door clanked and opened itself with a rush of air that almost felt as though it were saving us from suffocating. Leaving the room and closing the door behind us, I wanted to fall to the floor and scream at the Gods.

Why do you allow such atrocities in a world you control?

Even with the door blocking our view of the room, I could still see the images of the screaming children when I closed my eyes. I knew that Maia's involvement with the Academy included questionable things, but this was far beyond anything I'd imagined.

"What was that? I want answers before we keep following you." We were all surprised at seeing Senga be the one to confront Maia. She wasn't in a position to demand anything, especially because Maia was the one guiding us, but I suppose none of us felt comfortable around her after everything we'd seen. It was simply something we couldn't ignore and leave for later.

Hesitantly, Maia stepped forward. She seemed timid and scared. “I-I know that what you all saw was—” Cutting herself off, she took a deep breath and recomposed herself. “What you saw is the process of *erasure*. As far as I’ve been taught, memory exists in both a physical form and in the soul. Both need to be tampered with in order to make a person a blank slate. Since they’re connected, tampering with one affects the other so it becomes a fragile balancing act... As you saw, if you wake up during the process, then your body reacts violently.

“This is... newest generation?” Reko asked, his voice rather solemn.

“It is. An adult has a better chance at surviving, but a child takes much less time as there’s less memories that need to be removed. In theory, this should be safer, since the process is quicker, but you saw what happens if the process is interrupted... With how well the last generation did in comparison to the first, the Academy has been steadily moving to younger and younger candidates.”

“But *why* did you help with this in the first place?!” Growled Reko.

“It didn’t start off with children!” Maia quickly responded before pleading her case. “Before I came, it wasn’t much different than the Academy in the East. The Cogs here consisted of cult members, outsiders they would hire in the hopes of converting them, and people that were desperate and willing to do anything for safety. On rare occasions, an Arcana would land at their doorstep. One of these Arcana knew a way to erase people’s memories and make them more obedient. He’s no longer here, but he trained the current Warden who’s been experimenting on the prisoners since.

The Academy’s always had big ambitions and goals that required more people. This *solution* was too tempting for them to pass on it. Once they learned how to erase people’s minds, they began buying slaves before eventually turning to prisoners as they were cheaper. Due to both of these groups having a wealth of memories and experiences, it took over a year to turn them into blank slates. In that time, their bodies would deteriorate and some would die. The end results were mixed as there were some successes, like Reko for example, but most were failures. Reko would have been around the same age as you three and I guess he, and the others who succeeded, gave them the idea to go younger one average when it came to prisoners. This marked the end of the first generation and the start of the second.”

“Does this mean we were prisoners?” I asked, suddenly connecting the dots between what she was saying and what it suggested.

“I’m not sure about the girls, but you certainly were.” She bluntly answered, much to my shock. “I don’t know what you did, but you were imprisoned at some point and then sold to the Academy. There’s a chance you could have just been captured during a battle or some other event, but it’s more likely you did something wrong. Innocents, especially young ones, are usually integrated back into society, due to the low population, or sold off as slaves at worst. As far as I’m aware, the majority of prisoners around your age are usually thieves, poachers, or on rare occasion, bandits who were charged with murder. You’ve never struck me as a bad person, but the second generation has never

been innocent. It's why I didn't feel so much guilt in erasing the minds of people like you. Our old justification was that we were rebirthing you as tools to better the world with."

"That's still wrong. Even if they did bad things in the past, to make them into nothing but tools for you to use..." Rosalia seemed to have trouble coming to terms with what was being said, but she set these feelings aside in order to ask Maia a question. "There's still something I don't get. If this stuff takes so long, then why do I remember us coming to this place on a boat not too long ago?"

"If any memories remain after the process, then they're likely scrambled. Your time frame is completely off, but to tell you the truth we haven't studied the effects of erasure on foreigners. Sora and Toma behave similarly, but we weren't sure about other races. It's why you were fast tracked past the usual training. They wanted to see how you would function as a regular Cog. They probably planned on giving you less dangerous assignments, but even if you died, our main concern was seeing if erasure worked and if you'd be obedient." She stopped for a moment to think before quickly adding, "I wasn't the one who did this to you either, it was likely the Warden since he was the one interested in expanding to foreigners. That being said... I do play a role in the erasure of most people who come here."

"You still have no answer." Reko stated, quite seriously. "I ask you why you did this to the children. Why you don't refuse?"

"And what do you think I'm doing now?" Maia responded, her voice raising to nearly a shout. "You think I liked doing this? You think I enjoyed knowing every day that I was destroying the lives of innocent kids?" Taking a moment to calm herself, she turned away from us. "I came here during the start of the second generation. I was desperate and willing to do just about anything. At the time I at least had the excuse that I was turning criminals into people that were useful to the world. I was also under the illusion that I could leave whenever I wanted to. Reko, you know better than anyone that they want us here until the day we die. I'm still useful to them. The Warden trained me himself, so I've taken over his job of preparing the new waves of recruits while he researches and experiments on his own. The third generation was his idea and it was backed by the higher ups in the Academy. I never got a say in it and the only way out would be to kill myself."

"You are trying to remove your blame! If you care so much, then why not?!" He walked over and forcibly turned her around. "I would have! Do you think Gods will forgive this? Can you forgive yourself? What is so important about your life that killing so many is fine?"

"And the people who died today aren't our responsibility?" Maia's words stunned Reko into silence. "You were fine with killing them, you were even fine with killing an unarmed Cog minutes ago... Do you realize how many of the last generation were still children as well? I'm not trying to excuse myself, I hate myself for this, but I did what I needed to in order to survive and accomplish my goal of disrupting this place. We all have our own reasons for wanting to escape, to *live*. If any of us had put the lives of others above our own, then we'd have never tried escaping in the first place. This was

always going to be the outcome. You had the choice to end your life too, but you didn't... Does that make you a bad person? I don't think so. I don't think any of you are bad people. In the time I've known each of you, I've never once thought you belonged here. I might not be able to say the same for myself, but at the very least I know I'm not as evil as the people who run this place. The truth is, none of us want to die here, so save the moral grandstanding for some other time."

"I... cannot trust you..." Replied the Toma, with a deep sadness in his voice. "You lied for years. You are not person I was thinking you were."

"I know." Maia admitted, looking away in shame. "Once we make it out of here, I'll go my own way. I always expected this to be the outcome anyway... For now though, at least help me kill the Warden. We owe it to the future generations we'd be stopping."

Reko stayed silent as he walked over towards Maia. I gripped the dagger in my hand without thinking. As much as I was horrified over what happened, I didn't want him to kill her. Still, even if I wanted to, could I even stop him?

Am I willing to kill him?

I held my breath as he grabbed her arm. In my mind, it was almost certain that he was going to stab her, however, he instead placed the torch in her hand and pushed her forward. "Go, lead us out. The children that *still live* deserve chance to be free. If you are sure Warden will be there, I will kill him. If we survive, then I want to never see you again."

Maia simply nodded and continued forward, without another word we got back into line and followed her through the dark hallway until we reached what looked to be a suspended rope bridge. As we approached, Senga seemed hesitant to cross it. Stopping, Reko decided to stay behind while Maia walked over to the other side. Normally, now would be the time when Maia would yell at us for wasting time, but she was silent. Convincing Senga that this was the only way, the three of us began crossing together with me in the lead and Rosalia pushing her from behind. The process was much slower than I would have liked, since Senga's legs were shaky and she took rather small steps. Trying to calm her friend, Rosalia began speaking to her in a soothing voice. "We're almost there. There's nothing to worry about. It looks a whole lot worse than it really—"

"Stop talking! Please, just— you two guide me there, okay?" Her sister snapped back.

Having failed at easing the girl's fears, Rosalia stayed quiet the rest of the way. To my surprise, Senga suddenly reached forward and tightly gripped my wrist. I wasn't sure if this was a sign of trust or a testament to how desperate she was for any form of safety. Either way, she held onto me for dear life until we finally made it to the other side where she immediately let go and distanced herself. At this point, I didn't even care about this reaction. What concerned me instead was the door in front of us. This door, from the look of things, seemed to be special as it was more akin to a giant slab of metal. It could easily fit five people across and was fairly tall as well. The middle of the door also had a strange looking wheel. Standing next to a keyhole, Maia informed us of an issue.

“This door leads outside. Normally we’d have three to four Tomas to open this thing, but we’re going to have to make do with all of us pulling on it.”

Three to four Tomas needed to open this thing? Were we really going to be able to? As always, we didn’t have much of a choice. It was our only way out and returning wasn’t an option, nor did I want to ever step foot in that room again.

To open the door, Maia inserted a key and much like the previous doors, something inside began moving, however, it didn’t immediately unseal. Instead, Reko was told to grab the wheel that was in the middle of the door, and after turning it, the door unsealed and shifted open slightly as the air from the inside rushed out. Since it opened outwards, it didn’t seem that hard to push it, but once I put my weight onto it, I saw that the door hadn’t moved an inch. I would have never fathomed a door could be this thick and heavy.

Lining up, we each took a spot by the door. Reko was near the furthest end, close to where you could almost see the outside, I was next to him, and the girls were together. More or less, this whole thing was going to depend on whether Reko had the strength in him to make up for our lack of it. In our first attempt, we tried to push with our hands, but our feet would slide from beneath us due to the smoothness of the stone floor. After a small break, we tried again, this time getting a small head start and ramming into the door with our shoulders. Although it was quite painful, we were given some hope when the door budged slightly, allowing more air to make its way out. Trying to judge how much more we needed, Reko squeezed his arm through the gap..

“One more! Full speed! Don’t think of pain!” Reko shouted as he had us line up about ten paces from the door. He seemed to be riling himself up as he smacked his own chest. “GO!” He suddenly shouted and we all charged at the door, ramming it with our full strength. I grunted in pain as my shoulder hit the solid metal, but the sudden force managed to move the door enough for Reko to rush into the opening and wedge himself to keep it from closing. Once he got stuck, he used the wall to hold him as he pushed with both his arms and legs. Trying to help him, I joined in pushing the door, as did the others.

With great effort, he finally slipped through and fell to the other side. Fearing the door would close with nothing to wedge it, we scrambled through the gap as he rushed to grab the ledge and keep it open. As I went from the darkness of the cave into the light of the afternoon sun, I was completely blinded and sent Rosalia tumbling as I crashed into her. Squinting my eyes, I could barely make out what was happening, but as I turned around, I saw the vague shape of the mountain behind us.

Am I finally free?

Grabbing me by the arm, Maia pulled me off Rosalia and urged us into the shadow of the mountain so that we could hide from any patrols. Somewhat shielded from the light, my eyes began to adjust and I was able to finally see clearly. There were no walls or buildings anywhere in front of us, only a path leading down the mountain. I looked back at the giant metal door and then to my

companions. It almost felt too good to be true. We're all still alive. Come what may, I knew one thing to be true and it overwhelmed me with joy.

It's possible for all of us to survive the escape.

Above us, laid the wide open sky, now clouded with smoke but still as vast and beautiful as it had always been. For the first time in my life, I'm free.

Chapter XVII

Endless Skies

Despite there not being much covering the path down the mountain, the further along you went, the more the mountain itself would hide you from prying eyes. Only Soras would really be able to see you, and considering the way it was hidden, they'd have to know where to look as it was carved into the side of the mountain and likely could only be seen from specific angles. Adding to this, there were likely a hundred different other locations a guard would scout before thinking of coming up here. The mountains have always been a natural defense for the Academy due to how steep and tall they are. If they were searching for attackers, or sabotegers from within, the forest would be a more logical target. Knowing from experience that this was where they'd concentrate their efforts, I could take a moment to take in the significance of this moment.

"What are you looking at?" Asked Rosalia, noticing I wasn't paying attention to the path ahead.

"The sky." I replied. "Now that we're leaving the Academy, that means I can fly whenever and wherever I want."

"But... You're still gonna stay with us, right?"

"Of course I am." Leaning in closer, I whispered, "I'm not sure what's going to happen to those two, so our plans may not be the same anymore."

"I hope so, they both kind of freak me out for different reasons." She whispered back. "Maia was kinda starting to grow on me, but after everything that happened today, I don't know what to think of her anymore... Reko seems fine, but I don't know enough about the guy to trust him either. We'll be fine with just the three of us, right?"

"Whatever happens, I'll stay with you two. This world is far too dangerous for me to go off and not worry that something will happen to either of you... Also, I've been quite clear that I have nowhere to go in specific either way."

"I guess the three of us are stuck together now, right Sunny?" Rosalia said aloud as she turned to her sister.

Senga slowly shook her head, but she didn't protest my involvement either so this was a good sign. I looked forward to us traveling together, but as much as I'd like to think that things will only get better from here, it's hard to erase what happened earlier from my mind. I don't think any of us were ever under any illusion that Maia was a good person, but what we saw far surpassed anything we'd imagined. Unlike the rest of us, she joined this place willingly. Thinking back to our interactions, it's hard to separate the person I knew from the person that she's been in secret. I don't know how to feel about her... Even with the things she's done, I can't help but feel some guilt over not living up to my promise to her.

After all, she didn't want to get abandoned.

Can I forgive her for what she's done?

Would the others even be willing to?

It doesn't seem likely. Truly, I wish there was a way for us to continue on together. Maybe in time I could understand Maia's reasoning better. Even with everything I've seen, I don't think of her as an evil person. She's harsh and willing to do things I may never do, but she's not malicious. She could have easily mistreated us, and yet I never felt that she took advantage of the situation we were in. Apart from Rosalia, she's been the kindest person I've met... Which perhaps just says more about the Academy's treatment of me than her character. Regardless, I think I understand my feelings toward her.

As for Reko, I don't really know much about him. He seems to be the oldest of us and he has his own separate goals to pursue. He's struck me as a genuinely good man, but I'm not sure if he'd have a reason to travel with us if Maia is gone. Even if Maia stayed, I feel as though he wouldn't be capable of forgiving her after everything she did. Losing the two of them makes things more dangerous for us, but I suppose it doesn't make things impossible either. I have the blessing of the Shepherdess with me. Even if it's a rather gruesome gift, it's a great boon nonetheless.

Still, is it really impossible to keep the group together?

I struggled with this thought for some time. After about an hour of walking, we were finally getting close to the bottom of the mountain. From here, you could see the tops of the trees and the path diving down towards the forest floor. It's quite strange that there's just a path leading to the Academy out in the forest for anyone to come across, but I suppose you'd have to know of its existence to find it. Even should you stumble upon it by accident, there's no way you'd be able to open the giant door either. Still, it makes me question why this path exists in the first place.

As we left the foot of the mountain and entered the forest, we became remarkably well hidden from prying eyes. By now I began to wonder when we were supposed to come across this infamous *Warden* or if we were even going to encounter him at all. At this point we were basically free to leave if we wanted. Perhaps this would be the better option for us as we had nothing to do with—

"Stop!" Rosalia suddenly called out. "It's an ambush!"

Seeing that they'd been spotted, a group of Academy members stepped out from behind the trees. All of them were armed, and among them was a Toma Champion who wore armor similar to Reko's. In all, there appeared to be four Soras and two Tomas. The one to address us wasn't the Champion, but instead one of the Cogs that appeared to be a Sora.

"You're leaving without a word to those who have taken care of you all these years? We who took you in and gave you a home. How did you repay us, Maia? I want to hear the words from your lips." Waiting for a reply, he was met with silence. Ignoring the lack of a reply, he continued by answering his own question. "You repaid our generosity with *murder* and *lies* for the brothers and

sisters who treated you as their own. We made you what you are. Without us, you would have been dead on the side of some road by now.”

“I don’t want to hear anything about loyalty from *you* of all people.” Maia finally replied, disgust thick in her voice. “You’ve always been a sick bastard that’d kill your own mother if it meant getting what you wanted.” Drawing a dagger, Maia seemed ready to fight, which worried me as they appeared to be a cut above anything we’d encountered thus far.

“Had I not been travelling to our neighboring village, you might have caught me off-guard. You were hoping that would be the case, didn’t you?” Spreading his arms out wide, he looked up at the sky. “Well, I must be loved by the Gods! As for you... What a pity. You were a very promising apprentice. Tell me, my lovely assistant, I recognize your handler, but who are these other three you’ve dragged along to their graves?”

“Screw your answers! You can go find them in hell!”

Maia dropped her pack and in an instant flung the dagger she held at the Warden. The Champion that was with him blocked the dagger by shielding the man with his own hand. Despite the knife impaling it, the Toma simply yanked out the blade and threw it aside. Realizing what was about to happen, we dropped our packs as well.

“This is your final warning, Maia.” The Sora said while motioning over to one of his flying guards to ready himself. “Come back with us peacefully. There’s no need for any more bloodshed today. We both know you’re too useful for me to want to kill you.”

I hadn’t noticed until now, partly due to her pack covering it, but Maia was hiding a unique armament this entire time. Female combatants were already exceedingly rare, but never had I seen *any* combatant with this form of armament. She didn’t have a sword or a spear, but rather the weapon that every low-ranking guard carried on their person. The same weapon that was allowed due to it giving an advantage against the unarmed while still being easily outclassed by larger weapons, the dagger, however, in this case it wasn’t just one but many. They were strapped around her body in what looked like belts. As she pulled two out, I noticed that they were actually slightly smaller and made completely of metal. The knives were thinner and shaped in a way where I immediately recognized why there were so many. As one of the Soras was about to shoot her with his sling, she flung her daggers in such a quick motion that I nearly missed it. The guard attempted to shield himself with his arms, but the daggers seemed to curve mid-air and made it through his defense, one striking him in the ribs while the other impaled itself into the top of his forehead. I’d never seen such a strange and terrifyingly accurate throw.

“You unruly bitch! We were going to take you alive!” The man quickly motioned to the other two Sora that were still alive. “Go and call for reinforcements!”

As much as I didn’t want to leave Rosalia and Senga undefended, I knew that we’d be dead if these Soras accomplished their task. I’m not going to let that happen again. Setting off after them, I

realized that they weren't very fast. Perhaps they weren't properly rested from their journey back, or more than likely, they'd been forced to scout or deliver messages back and forth the entire time. Whatever the case, I didn't have a hard time catching up to them. From this distance, I could see that they were likely from my generation as they seemed to be younger than the typical guard. There's a good chance this was one of their first assignments outside of the Academy's walls.

Reaching towards my waist, I untied my sling and loaded a stone. They weren't making any serious attempts to dodge and instead continued to try their hardest to outfly me. Winding up my throw, I waited for the right moment and took my shot. As I let go, I heard two cracks. The first came from the stone cracking through the air itself, and the second from it smacking the back of the Sora's head. Immediately, his wings dissipated and he fell limply toward the earth below. Quickly loading a second shot, I was ready to take out his partner, but to my utter shock he dove after the one I'd just hit.

What is he doing?

It looked as though he were abandoning his duty to save the other one. Confused by this, I kept my sling ready but followed as they both crashed through the trees. The one that had dove after the unconscious one wasn't fast enough. His partner's body ragdolled against the tree branches until it finally slammed into the ground. At this point, I expected the other Sora to retaliate, but instead he ran over towards the dead body.

"No no no! Please, open your eyes, Fifteen!"

The anguish in the boy's voice was undeniable. It couldn't be an act, nor were they the kind to try this trickery. The realization of what was happening stunned me.

Has there really been another one like me this whole time?

He must have been in one of the other groups. There was no joy in this discovery. Instead, I felt immense guilt. I didn't know what to say, nor was there really anything I could do to rectify this situation. Had this other one, *Fifteen*, been the same as well? How many more of us have been hiding in plain sight? My mouth opened and I felt my tongue move as though it were trying to find the words to apologize, but I stopped myself just as I was about to.

They'll kill Rosalia again.

I have no way of knowing this... but do I want to take the risk? It could end up being my own friend lying dead on the ground instead. Knowing what I had to do, I felt a deep pain in my soul as I drew my sword.

I know how much it hurts.

I'll make it quick.

The poor boy wasn't even looking at me.

Am I doing the right thing?

It doesn't matter, I need to do this.

Is it possible to talk things out?

I'm filling my head with useless thoughts! Because of my hesitation, the boy seemed to suddenly remember my presence. Drawing his dagger, he staggered to his feet. Breaking into a sprint, he charged at me like a wild animal, not caring to use any of the techniques we'd learned. His charge was completely suicidal... and yet I think he knew that.

As righteous as the anger burning in his veins may have been, luck had forsaken him this day. My sword was much longer than his dagger or outstretched arm could ever have hoped to be. There was no point in using the buckler. He'd more or less impaled himself on my blade due to his reckless charge. The shock of the pain caused him to tense up for a moment as a gasp escaped his lips. Weakly, he attempted to raise his dagger once more, but it was no use. He was too far away and there was not enough life left in him. His body soon went limp and I let him fall to the floor. Two lives ended in mere minutes.

I shouldn't feel guilty. I'm protecting those who rely on me... *and yet*. Giving a quick apology underneath my breath, I kicked him off my blade and wiped the blood on his uniform. Before my mind could start distracting me with pointless thoughts, I prepared to take flight; however, I suddenly noticed that the other boy, Fifteen, was moving.

He seemed to be in bad condition, but still alive. I hesitated in raising my sword again.

Does killing someone who poses no threat make me a murderer?

Am I willing to murder this boy to protect my companions?

The Shepherdess warned me about tainting my soul. As scared as I was of him recovering and calling for reinforcements, I couldn't bring myself to lift my sword. It was pitiful to see him squirm in pain as his friend lay dead just feet away.

I can't do this.

I can't bring myself to *murder* him.

Am I failing to protect the others?

With a heavy sigh, I sheathed my sword and flew away. Trying to keep my mind clear of any useless thoughts, I raced back to where the fighting was still taking place. I saw that Reko and the other Champion were locked in an intense battle while the other Toma lay dead with various daggers and stab wounds covering his body. Even the Champion had daggers sticking out of the exposed portions of his armor, however, Maia's focus wasn't on him at the moment. Instead, I caught sight of the mindbending fight that she was involved in. Chunks of ice and daggers flying around at impossible angles were all I could see as the two Arcana fought one another. Although the Warden was fighting more defensively, the two of them seemed evenly matched... At least, as far as I could tell. I understood that Maia was able to do rather impossible things with her ability to heal, but what I was witnessing was something else entirely. I knew the Arcana were powerful, but this defies everything I understood about the world. I couldn't help but stay hovering for a moment, simply watching in absolute awe at what was happening before me.

What about the girls?

Realizing that I couldn't see either Senga or Rosalia, I began to search for them in a panic. "Rosalia!" I called out and upon hearing no reply, I began to fear the worst. I flew just above the ground, nearly getting caught in the fight between the two giants in my desperate search. That's when I suddenly heard a voice cry out from a nearby bush.

"Captain!" Rosalia and Senga were hiding together in a bush not too far from the action.

"Are you two alright?" I asked.

"We are... Are you okay? I smell blood." Rosalia tried to examine me, but I pushed her away.

"It's... not mine." Upon admitting there was an awkward pause. Getting up from the bush, I called back to them as I was about to run off, "The other two might need my help, so stay here and—"

"Wait!" Rosalia rushed out of the bush and grabbed me by the arm. Frantically searching her pouches, she pulled out a small stick that looked as though it were dipped in a brownish-red substance as well as an explosive pot. "This is one of the more dangerous explosives. It's meant to actually hurt people, so make sure it only hits the bad guys. There's a quick fuse on it that's close to three seconds. The stick lights instantly the second you strike it hard against something. I made it last second because I thought you might need it. They're pretty useful, you can strike it on almost anything." She mimicked the motion I should use without actually touching the material on her pants. "Whoever you decide to help, you can—Look out!"

She tried to tackle me, but I immediately shoved her beneath me by sheer instinct. Soon after throwing her to the ground, I felt a sharp pain in my back. The shock of it froze me for a moment, but I refocused myself just in time to turn around and catch the hand of the boy that was attempting to bring down his knife once more. Kicking Rosalia away from me, the boy leaned his weight onto the knife, holding it mere inches from my neck. No longer wearing his hood, the boy's crazed expression was seared into my eyes as he screamed unintelligible hysterics. Feeling an intense pain and weakness from my right arm, I couldn't force him off of me.

I'm going to die,

I closed my eyes and gritted my teeth as the knife came closer. Just as I had resigned myself to my fate, his strength vanished. Opening my eyes, I saw that Senga had plunged her dagger into the boy's neck. Shocked by the sudden mortal wound he received, he clutched the handle with his free hand while choking on his own blood.

Ripping away the knife he had used against me, I ended his misery by shoving it into the side of his temple. A tenseness came upon his body before he fell dead atop of me. Unable to get him off, the girls had to rush over as his blood began soaking me. Laying there, panting and unable to get up, it became obvious that my injury was serious.

"Captain! You're hurt!" Rosalia yelled as she tried to unbutton my jacket.

“I know I am... Don’t worry about me. You two should go back to hiding. There’s no telling if the other two will be able to win.” Spotting Rosalia’s explosive, I tried to crawl over towards it but was immediately stopped.

“Stop moving! You’re bleeding all over the place!” Rosalia’s voice was breaking as she tried to retain her composure. “Sunny! Go get the bandages!”

Senga seemed to still be in a state of shock over what had just occurred, but upon hearing Rosalia’s exasperated voice she snapped back to the present and ran to go get the medical supplies. As I felt the blood slowly drain out of my body, I saw Rosalia attempt to use her own hood to staunch the flow of blood. I’d been stabbed in the back so it would have been more effective to turn me around, but I don’t think it mattered much at this point. I needed Maia’s help.

“Rosalia, I’m serious. Stop trying to prevent me from helping them. I need Maia to heal me and I still have enough strength to get the job done.”

“Sunny! Stay here with him and make sure he doesn’t follow me!” Grabbing the explosive and the stick from the ground, Rosalia began rushing over towards the fight. Dropping the medical supplies she was carrying, Senga immediately went after her.

“Gods, what a damn pain this is! Why can’t this ever be easy!” I began to yell out loud as I tried to crawl over towards a nearby tree. With my good arm, I helped myself up to my feet. I could feel the blood streaming down my back as the pain only got worse.

Boom

Hearing the noise, I rushed forward, staggering my way closer to the battle. I did everything I could to reach them, but I felt so incredibly dizzy that I couldn’t keep my balance. Tumbling to the floor, the world continued to spin even after I was lying on my back once more. Growing desperate, I tried to crawl my way over, but I didn’t make it far before my strength began to fail me as well.

“Gods, please don’t let them die!” I begged aloud with tears in my eyes. “Please save them!” As I pleaded to the Gods I suddenly heard the sound of footsteps approaching. Senga and Rosalia had returned.

“Captain!” Rosalia shouted as she saw me on the floor. “Why’d you chase after us? Look at you! You’re all—” Her voice began to break as she fought to remain calm. “Don’t worry, Sunny’s going to get the bandages and Maia is on her way back. We might not have gotten the guy, but at least we’ll be able to save you. Just stay with us, buddy... Please.”

After helping me onto my back, she didn’t let go of my hand. Feeling comforted by this, I gave it a slight squeeze. Looking up at her, I couldn’t help but smile.

“Rosalia... I never had the chance to tell you this before... but I’m glad I met you.”

I felt as though I were on the verge of drifting off into a very peaceful sleep. At first I thought it was just the adrenaline leaving my body, or perhaps the exertion of everything until now catching up, but soon after I realized that I might actually be in the process of dying.

“Captain?” She called out to me, but everything was becoming blurry. “You promised me you would stay with us! Don’t break your promise!” She began to shake me in an effort to get me to respond. “I-I won’t forgive you if you break your promise!”

It might be a strange time to notice this, but now that she’s so close, I’m starting to realize how beautiful her eyes are. I just wish they weren’t filled with tears so often...

Chapter XVIII

Revolution

Everything was dark. There was nothing in sight that I could make sense of. Only vague silhouettes. This isn't Maia's house nor is it the fields where the Shepherdess resides. This is somewhere else entirely. A chill ran down my spine as I thought about the possibility that I had gone to hell for all the killing I'd done... but I soon realized that the chill itself meant I was still alive. Especially because it was mostly due to the fever I had.

Waves of dull pain radiated from my wound to the rest of my body. It hurt even worse than when I'd woken up from Maia's surgery. Wherever we were, it seemed to be the inside of a building as I couldn't see the stars nor feel the breeze. They'd laid me down on something hard and smooth. It was almost like Maia's couch if it had all the skins removed.

Hovering over me, a dark silhouette suddenly came into view, frightening me. Raising my arm to protect my face, it suddenly stopped.

"Try and stay still. If your stitches rip, you'll start bleeding again."

"Senga?" I suddenly felt the comfort of a wet, cool rag pressed against my forehead. Taking another wet rag, she dabbed the rest of my face a bit. Having recognized her voice, and with the lack of glowing eyes, I knew it was her, but why was she caring for me? What had happened to the others? "What happened? Where are we?" I asked, in an effort to calm my fears.

She ignored me for a moment and turned away, ringing out the excess water from the rag in her hand. The sound of the dripping water was rather soothing. Where'd she get that water from? On that note, where'd the bucket come from as well?

"We're in a church. After the fighting—Stop!" She did her best to keep her voice as quiet as possible, but she seemed genuinely startled that I had tried to get up. The girl put her hand on my chest firmly, holding me down with as little force as possible. "Are you an idiot? Do you want to ruin all the work I put into trying to keep you alive?"

"We can't stay here—"

"And where exactly do you want to go? You think it's smart to go out in the middle of a storm?"

"What storm?"

Almost as if she herself had summoned it, a flash of lightning illuminated her displeased face, followed by loud, booming thunder, which shook the building ever so slightly. The gentle rain, that had barely been audible before, slowly rose to a constant, loud stream of noise.

"I see..." Recovering from my brief embarrassment, I continued. "Either way, it's dangerous to remain here. The scouts from the Academy will eventually be drawn to this place. They'll be looking for anything that could serve as a shelter. Wouldn't this building stand out?"

“Maybe.” She replied, shrugging her shoulders. “The storm’s been really heavy since we got here though. Even if you’re right, it’s not like we can move right now. Reko, Maia, and Rose are all exhausted and sleeping. Apart from that, you can’t move on your own and I haven’t had the chance to rest either...”

“Oh... I’m sorry you had to look after me.”

She shook her head, dismissing my apology. “Even if you weren’t hurt, someone had to stay up and keep an eye out. Since I didn’t do any of the fighting, I think it’s only fair that I’m the one who stayed up.”

Some time passed as we watched the storm through the windows. They were stained and cracked, so it was a bit difficult to see through them clearly, but the flashes of lightning briefly illuminated the world around us. A bit of water leaked through the ceiling and came in through the windows that were broken, but most of the church was dry. At times I would stop staring at the storm and instead look at Senga. This was the first time I’d ever felt comforted by her presence. Although I wanted to close my eyes and sleep, I also wanted to speak with her a bit more.

“I hope the storm keeps us safe.” I said aloud, not really knowing how to start a new conversation.

“Sometimes that’s all you can do.”

“Hope a storm keeps you safe?”

“No, I was meaning that sometimes you have to hope for the best when there’s nothing else you can do.”

“Ah, I suppose I understand then.”

A bit of an awkward silence passed before she took the damp rag from my forehead and replaced it with a fresh one. I couldn’t help but sigh with relief as I felt the cool water touch my face. Now that I thought about it, why had I gotten a fever? Was it simply from the pain or did my wound get infected?

“Senga, be honest with me, are my wounds serious?”

Her sigh told me enough. “Maia said that you’ll be fine, but she warned me that you’d—well, she used another word, but basically you’d whine more than usual. Also, to make sure you don’t use your right arm until your wound closes.”

“My right arm? Didn’t I get stabbed in the back?”

“She said you got stabbed in a muscle that moves your arm. It’s like in the top right of your body, near your shoulder. I forgot what she called it, but the important thing is that it’s not that serious anymore.”

“Thank the Gods, it’s not serious after all.” I couldn’t help but chuckle upon saying that. “With how much this hurts, it almost makes me worry what she considers serious.”

“Not too serious *anymore*.” She corrected me. “As in, the real danger was in the past. You shouldn’t laugh about almost dying. You bled... a *lot*. We both thought you’d died.” My lack of response only encouraged her to keep going. “After I checked your pulse, we realized you’d just passed out. You made Rose cry, you idiot... To make things worse, the Warden got away and Maia spent a lot of her energy to make sure you’d survive the trip here. If she didn’t know about this place, then we would have been out of luck. With how tired she was, she passed out after healing Reko since he got injured during his fight too.”

“She knew about this place?” Some connections began to form as to how they came to be here before us and perhaps why we’d gotten attacked. It made the worry that a similar thing would happen again only grow. “If she knew about this place, doesn’t that mean others may as well?”

“And what do you want me to do about that?” She answered back, rather annoyed that I’d brought it up again. “If you’re going to keep complaining about it, just go back to sleep.”

“Sorry... I realize you all went through a lot while I was passed out. I’m not exactly used to having others care for me... I wish I were stronger so I wouldn’t cause you all such issues.”

“Stop trying to pity yourself.” She responded rather aggressively. “You did fine. You saved Rose’s life. Get used to having others care about whether you live or die and don’t make a big deal out of your injury. She still feels guilty for all the things she’s put you through.”

“It wasn’t her fault. If anything—”

“Why’d you do it?” I was taken aback by the question. My silence caused her to push again. “You had no way to know you’d live. I used to think you wanted something from us, but it’s hard to say that when I almost saw you die. I don’t want to say it but... Is it because you love Rose?”

“Love?” I couldn’t help but repeat it back as it almost felt like an accusation. I suppose I did love her, but I loved Maia and even Senga to an extent as well. I cared for them and went through all of this in order to save their lives. Even the Shepherdess made this clear in her own way. Still, it didn’t seem to mean the same based on how she said it. Was this one of the other forms that the Shepherdess was alluding to?

“I have the feeling that you’re not just talking of *friendship*, am I right?” I asked to which she nodded in response. “The only other *love* I know of is from the Book of life, but it’s meant for marriage. I don’t mean to offend, but I never really considered that. The only love I know of is friendship. In my heart, I love both Rosalia and Maia. Even if you dislike me, I still worry for you as well so I suppose I love you too—”

“What? No! That’s not what I meant at all!” Rosalia stirred in her sleep from how loudly Senga had raised her voice. Embarrassed by this, she regained her composure and lowered it back down to nearly a whisper. “I mean—Yes, marriage is a part of love but... Do you really not know what *love* I’m talking about?”

“Vaguely?... I think. I thought I had a clue but you’re making me feel as though I don’t. The Book of Life says that love can produce life. It happens when a male and female love one another. Is that right?”

“Err... I guess, but—”

“But *love* also means the love you have for your companions that you call *friends*. A friendship is a form of mutual union. In that way, I do love Rosalia. I also care for you and Maia, but it doesn’t feel as mutual. Even so, we’ve been through a lot so we’re not strangers either, right? If we felt nothing for each other, then we’d only help if ordered to like those in the Academy.”

She stayed silent for a while before finding something to challenge. “Who says I wasn’t told to help you? If Maia or Rosalia ask me to take care of you, I will. Not because I care about you, but because I like them.”

Feeling my spirit itself become wounded by her sharp tongue, I turned my head to look at the storm outside instead. “I hadn’t considered that.”

To my surprise, I heard Senga chuckle at my comment. When I turned back to look at her, however, she had the same expressionless face. Feeling defeated, I closed my eyes but was prevented from sleeping when she suddenly whispered into my ear.

“Let me warn you about something.” Interested, I paid close attention. “When Maia wakes up, she’s going to be very angry at you.”

“I forgot to ask you about that... Why are Reko and Maia still with us? I thought they were going their own ways.”

Sighing, she responded, “It’s a long story... but I guess it’s not like you’re going anywhere.” Swapping the rag on my forehead with a new one, she began informing me of what happened. “Reko and that other giant were in the middle of their fight when Rose suddenly threw the bomb behind them. The blast did a lot of damage to the other guy, but Reko was hurt a bit as well. Since the other giant couldn’t get back on his feet, Reko finished him off and went to go help Maia, but by then she heard Rosalia screaming about how you were dying. In the end, she let the Warden escape because if they focused on killing him, you probably would have died.”

I stayed silent as I processed what she said. It was incredibly touching that Maia had chosen to save me over her vendetta with that man, but I also felt a heavy weight upon me over making such a mistake. My mercy was now going to cause others to suffer. In the end, had I made the right choice?

If I died, I could try again.

It was a frightening thought to have. It’s true that I could try again. I would be saving many lives if I did... and yet I can’t do it. I’m scared of dying again. I don’t want to go through all of this a second time. What if I can’t accomplish what I have a second time? I’d be dooming my own companions.

I also don’t have it in me to end my own life.

The Shepherdess was clear that I shouldn't be using this gift so haphazardly. I'll doubtless make many more mistakes throughout my life. I can't resort to relying on such a dangerous power every time something happens that I dislike. Like it or not, this is simply a mistake I'll have to learn from and shoulder the burden of.

"You should be glad you're alive." Senga suddenly said, perhaps noticing my inner turmoil.

"A lot of people are going to suffer because of my mistake."

"A lot of people were going to suffer either way." She reminded me. "Maia was only able to do this because of you and Rose working together to do a lot of the hard parts. By herself, even with the help of the giant, they probably would have died or had to leave without killing that man anyways. Nothing in this life is ever gonna be perfect or easy. You just have to come to terms with what you can do and the few good things that come from it."

I was genuinely left stunned at how unexpectedly wise she was. Feeling as though she'd lifted the weight from my shoulders I was able to breathe a sigh of relief. "Thank you Senga." I said, closing my eyes and nearly falling asleep before she tapped my shoulder.

"I need a favor." She whispered, which sent my heart fluttering. "Make sure Maia doesn't know you got stabbed because you protected Rosalia. I don't want her holding it against her."

Although I was disappointed that she simply wanted me to hide the truth from Maia, I suppose she was right. It would be better for Maia to be angry with me than for her to take out any frustration on Rosalia.

"Alright." Just as I replied, I remembered there was something I'd been meaning to ask her in private. "Speaking of Maia... What do you think of her now that we've seen her secrets?"

"I... don't know." She admitted. "It scares me that she did all of those things. At the same time though, she gave everything up to save you. That means she can't be completely bad, right? Not a lot of people are willing to do something like that. I like that about her, and it makes me feel like I can trust her."

I was rather surprised at the vote of confidence that came from her. Maia must have made a good impression on her even before what happened and I can't deny that after what she did for me, it'd be hard for me to judge her.

"I feel the same, more or less. I owe Maia a great deal, and I've repaid some of that, but I also don't like that she keeps so much hidden from us. It worries me that she has other secrets of that nature. Even so... I was a prisoner myself and I'm not sure about the past lives of you or Rosalia either. We could all be hiding our own terrible secrets without even knowing."

She looked away for a moment, as if in thought, before returning her attention to me and shrugging. "Maybe, maybe not, who knows? I don't think about that stuff." Reaching over and adjusting the rag on my head, she wiped away some of the drops that were close to reaching my eyes.

“You still look tired. You should stop worrying about things you can’t control and go to sleep. It’ll be nice to not have so much noise anyways.”

“Alright.” I replied, feeling the fatigue closing my eyes for me. “Goodnight, Senga.”

“Mhm.” She hummed as I opened my eyes one last time to see her stare back out the nearby window, simply watching the storm in peace.

When next I awoke, it was due to a loud noise that wasn’t the usual thunder that occasionally erupted throughout the night. The trauma I’d suffered here nearly caused my heart to stop when I thought the same tragedy was about to unfold once more. Thankfully, I soon saw that it was just my clumsy friend knocking over the small stool Senga had been using. Slowly, I turned to meet her gaze. Her face was still cringing from how loud the sound had been, but upon seeing me she looked elated.

“Captain!” She exclaimed a bit louder than she likely meant to. Quickly covering her mouth, she looked over to make sure she hadn’t woken up the others as well. “Uh, whoops, I’m sorry I woke you up. Let me change the rag on your head so you can go back to sleep...”

“It’s alright.” Remembering that my face was bare for all to see, I tried to reassure her with a smile despite still feeling terrible. “I’m glad to see you again.”

She seemed to relax upon hearing my words, yet she still cautiously approached me. “How do you feel?” Even her voice was quite timid.

“I’ve been better.” I replied before quickly adding, “You know, with how often this has happened lately, I’m starting to get used to it. The Gods have been good to me though so I’m sure I’ll be well again soon. Don’t worry yourself over me.”

Based on the look that soon came to her face, I knew I’d chosen the wrong words. She shook her head, her ears drooping. “You said something similar before passing out. I don’t like it when you lie to me, and I don’t want you getting used to this either. Maia warned me that you’re being stupid about your health. You know what she said? *He’s genuinely going to end up crippling himself someday if he’s lucky enough to not die outright.* Just because you’ve been lucky until now—Do you not care about yourself?”

Her voice began to waver as she fought between anger and sadness. Realizing that I didn’t have the words yet, I thought of something else in the meantime. “Come a bit closer, so I can hear you better.” As she did, I placed my hand on her cheek. “I’m sorry.”

“But it’s not your fault...”

“It’s not, but I also don’t like making you cry.” Wiping away the tear that came down her cheek, I couldn’t help but want to tease her a bit. “You’re quite the tenderhearted person, aren’t you? Shedding tears over someone like me.” Removing my hand, she seemed angry once more.

“I don’t like it when you say those things.”

Taken aback, I tried to figure out the source of her issue. “The teasing? I’m sorry, I just wanted to lighten the mood.”

“No, I hate it when you don’t take your life seriously.” Hiding her face from me, she turned towards the window. “I care about you... a lot. You know how much it hurts to see you like this and know it’s my fault every time? It’s not fair.”

Seeing the small shakes of her body and hearing her barely audible sniffles, I couldn’t help but feel like a failure. I’d done the exact opposite of what I meant to do. Trying one last time to soothe her worries, I decided to tell her the truth.

“It’s not your fault Rosalia... It’s mine, in actuality. You wouldn’t know because you only saw what happened at the end.” Feeling my throat tightening, I swallowed hard to force my voice to come through. “The pair of Sora I chased down... They were just like us. I shot one of them down with my sling. Instead of continuing with his mission, he went to save his friend. I didn’t believe what I was seeing until I realized how devastated he was by his friend’s death. He was so enraged that he charged at me despite knowing he would die. There’s no way he could have been faking such emotions.”

“Captain?” Rosalia suddenly turned around, surprised at what she was hearing.

“I ran him through with my sword before he even got close—” My voice nearly faltered before I regained my composure. “His friend ended up not being dead after all, just badly injured. He began stirring right as I was about to fly back. After what I’d done, I didn’t have it in me to kill him too. I left thinking that he’d be too injured to fly... I was wrong.”

“That’s the guy who—” She came closer and grabbed my hand. “It’s not your fault, Captain. You’re not a monster. Only monsters hurt others and don’t feel anything. You’re so far away from being a monster that sometimes I forget you’re a soldier. I know this is what you were trained to do, but I wish it wasn’t... I wish you could have just been born as something else, like a farmer or something. I don’t like seeing you sad.”

“If I weren’t a soldier, I wouldn’t be able to keep you safe.”

She hesitated before nodding her head. “That’s right. Even if I don’t like it, I guess you’re not wrong.”

“I noticed you tried to tackle me out of the way. You realize you would have died, right?”

“But you did the same for me. You keep—”

“I’m a lot stronger than you, Rosalia. Even if I look pathetic right now, I know I have a better chance at surviving than you do. It’s a gamble I’m always willing to make.”

Her nose wrinkled as she raised her voice. “And if you’re wrong?”

“I haven’t been wrong so far.” Seeing that I was only making her angry, I continued anyway. “The only other option I had was to let you get hurt. Like it or not, even Maia admits I’m shockingly tough to kill. Had you been the one to get stabbed, I might be mourning your loss instead of laying here, holding your hand.”

A mixture of sadness and pain showed on her face as she buried herself in my chest. “You dummy, absolute dummy, you don’t get it!”

"I don't." I admitted. "You're my precious friend. I wouldn't be able to live with myself if you died in my place."

"I feel the same way..." She mumbled through the fabric of my uniform.

"Then I promise—" For a moment I nearly promised to never die, but I knew that was impossible. Not wanting to lie to her, I modified it. "I promise that no matter what, I'll always find my way back to you."

"You better never break that promise." She said as she got up and wiped her tears.

Grabbing her hand with the one I was able to move, I held it in the air. "I, Captain, promise you, Rosalia, that I'll never leave you for long. Someway, somehow, I'll find my way back. As your friend, I never want to make you cry, so I swear it true... Umm, may a thousand needles pierce me... Sorry, I forgot the rest." The embarrassment of it all must have been clear on my face but Rosalia disregarded my mistake. Letting go of my hand, she happily rested her head on my chest with her ears tickling my chin.

"That's good enough, dummy... *Captain.*" She said, giggling as she closed her eyes.

Seeing her in such a good mood, I risked it all for an incredibly impulsive thought that crept its way into my mind. Before I could stop myself my hand went to the top of her head, stroking her hair and eventually making its way toward her ear. In one smooth motion, I transitioned to rubbing her ear which seemed to make her slightly jump, however, she didn't say anything.

It's so soft!

It really is like a wolf's ear, so strange... but not bad.

It was such a soothing feeling to be able to hold her like this. During such a wonderful moment, I could barely even feel my own fever. I noticed her tail begin to sway back and forth, so I suppose she enjoys this as well to some degree. Moving away from her head, I stroked her cheek with my thumb. It was so soft and plump that it was quite pleasant to touch. The blush of her face contrasted beautifully with the brightness of her blue eyes once she opened them. We stared at each other for a moment before looking away awkwardly as she sat back up on the stool.

Clearing her throat, she tried to bring up a new topic. "W-Well, to help keep you safe, I've got some ideas brewing in my head. The materials might be hard to find, but we'll see if there are other things that'll make due while we're travelling. You're still planning to be my assistant, right?"

"You did say you'd teach me useful things."

"Good, you wanna start your lessons now?" I groaned and turned to face away from her. "Hey! You're gonna get nowhere with that kind of attitude!" She seemed to be joking as she soon began wringing another rag. "Face over here so I can give you a fresh one."

As I looked up at her, I felt nervous all of the sudden. I found a beauty in her I hadn't seen before... Is this what Senga had meant? The feeling of the cool water on my forehead and the view of

the the first rays of the morning sun eased my nerves. This is the beginning of something new, *something better*.

As I stared at the window, a shadow suddenly crept up into view. Rosalia seemed to have already noticed her, but it took her walking into the light for me to see that it was Maia. It seemed everyone had chosen to remove their hoods now that there was no plausible deniability as to who we were.

“If you two are done talking, then I need you to get this dumbass prepped to move. Leave the bucket and bring the wet rags. His fever shouldn’t last much longer.”

“Maia?” I said aloud, but she ignored me. “I guess she’s still angry with me.”

“She probably is.” Rosalia said as she helped me to sit up. “Still, she saved your life, so it’s not like she hates your guts.”

“I’m assuming you don’t have an issue with her even after everything we saw?” I said quietly.

“Without her, you’d be dead right now.” Her voice was rather somber before quickly perking back up. “I’ll deal with her as long as she can help keep you safe. Since I can’t fight, it’s good having those other two around. Also, did you see the crazy stuff she could do with those knives?”

“I hardly got to see any of it.”

As I got to my feet, she supported me by allowing me to steady myself on her shoulder. I more or less had the same issues walking as when I first awoke in Maia’s house. It made me worried about slowing down my group.

“Once we get you nice and comfy on the cart, I’ll tell you all about it!”

“Cart?” I repeated. “Where’d you get that from?”

“The church had a little storage building out back and the cart was right next to it. Senga found it when she was looking for a bucket.”

“Oh.” Was all I could say as we walked out of the church doors and I saw Maia and Reko waiting outside as Senga laid down a blanket and one of the packs on the cart.

Leaning over and patting the cart, Maia began teasing me. “You’ve got your very own carriage and a blanket to keep you warm. I better not hear any whining from you, alright?”

“Ah—Thank you.” I said as I lowered my head. “I’m sorry for slowing you all down.”

“Just shut up and get in the cart.” She replied as both Rosalia and her helped me onto it. It wasn’t very large, but if I curled up my legs and snuggled next to the supply pack, I could lay down. With me settled in, they began the difficult task of getting the cart through the woods. It was a rather bumpy ride as Reko had to get it over various tree roots, but this was necessary for the time being since we were still within the Academy’s range.

As I jumped around to and fro on the back of the cart, unable to fall asleep, I looked to my companions and felt a sense of peace. Even in the midst of such danger, I’ve never felt more safe. I don’t

really understand why we weren't attacked as we were before, nor do I really understand much of anything for that matter.

There's many things that still elude me, and now that I think about it, I suppose I never found the answer as to *why* I was ever here in the first place either. I have a vague idea now, but just like the Academy, my companions, or even my own life, it's still mostly a mystery. Unlike before, however, I found that it didn't bother me as much. I'm simply thankful to the Gods for the little that I do know. Why? Because it allows me to be, *me*.

As for why I'm *still* here... I found the answer.

It's because of those that love me. Even if this world is dark and cruel at times, it's thanks to their *love* that I'm still here and why I will always find my way back to them.