

To DO:

- Consistent plot, with all the parts presented in the right order.
- Sensory details: are the characters vivid in the reader's mind? Is the world/setting? Are you using all sight, scent, touch, sound, and taste to describe?
- Okesh: Are there any creative/fun usage of the double-rule for both Poe-Poe and Zoe?

Structural Edit

Line Edit

Proof Reading

Poe-Poe

There was a Tearless ambling near Zoe's cottage.

She thought at first it was the merchant's daughter sent to request another translation due to the small frame under the coat, then she spotted the lizard-like tail dragging a line on the ground.

It's been almost a decade since the five nations signed the treaties and opened the borders, but Zoe was still surprised to see a Tearless in the outskirts of the village. The few she'd met were often travelers on their way to the eastern seaports or the capital in the north. She never had one deliberately search her out, nor did she know how the Tearless even knew of her.

Zoe watched from a distance, hiding behind bushes while munching on the batch of damson plums the farmer's wife had given her.

The Tearless dragged its feet around the porch, eyeing through the cracks on the shut door. The frayed tunic and dirty cloth bag were not a good sign. It spoke of cheap travel, choosing to sleep under a tree rather than paying for a bed, which could mean either poor or stingy. The squeaking oversized boots made Zoe believe it was the first option. Still, every coin counted and she could also get some practice in Okesh.

The Tearless's large ears twitched by the sound of sandals crunching on gravel. It spun around and looked up at Zoe with a pair of amber eyes. The shape of the ears, the slitted pupils, and the small nose made Zoe think of a cat, but instead of fur, the Tearless was covered in scales, gray and smooth like river stones.

"Egg- eggskyuse maah," the Tearless said, high-pitched and nasal typical of the females. Her eyes traveled over Zoe's simple robes, the rucksack filled with plums, and finally locked onto Zoe's pendant. "Na-namer? You Namer?" She pronounced the words in an unsure tone, clobbering the Arzan language.

"*Brich' sah laving*," Zoe said, cupping a hand behind her ear. It was a common greeting among the Tearless and translated to 'I hear you.'

The Tearless's mouth dropped as if Zoe had performed magic. "*You speak Okesh!*" she said, cupping both her hands behind her ears. "*You must be Namer! All Namers are head-head!*"

Okesh, the Tearless language, had a peculiar system where doubling the word gave it a new meaning. Thankfully, most were easy enough to understand through context.

"*Student*," Zoe corrected. "*My name's Zoe. How can I help you?*" She hoped it was scribe work since it paid more than a translation. Besides, Okesh had an easy writing system based on phonetic notation.

"*Poe-Poe*," the Tearless said, patting her chest. "*I want a name reading!*"

“*Ah.*” Zoe shook her head. “*I can’t do that.*” She thought for a moment, remembering the words for goodbye. “*Let’s laugh again.*”

She nudged the Tearless away from the door, unlocked it with a click, stepped inside, and almost shut the door if not for a boot jamming the edge with a squeak.

“*I have two pig-pig tusks,*” Poe-Poe said, her claw-like fingers prying into the gap.

“*It’s not about cost,*” Zoe said firmly, pressing her body against the door. She tried to kick away the shoe and almost cursed out loud by how hard it was. “*I’m not... uhm... good-good for name reading.*”

“*Three pig-pig tusks?*”

“What’s happening here?” A male voice, speaking in Arzan, had joined the Tearless. Zoe recognized the chirpy tone.

“Timm!” she shouted. “Help me with — “

“Afternoon, Zoe,” the voice cut her off. “I’m here to pick up the translation for the Sutha poem. Is it done?”

“Yes, but —”

“There’s a scale-skin out here. She looks eager to talk to you.”

A high-pitched nasal voice screeched in Okesh, “*FOUR PIG-PIG TUSKS!*”

“She *sounds* eager too,” Timm continued. “Mind if we come in?”

“No!” Zoe threw her whole body against the door. “Timm, don’t you dare— “

But the door burst open before she managed to finish her sentence, knocking Zoe to the floor, spilling plums everywhere. The Tearless strode in with hesitant steps, following a large man flaunting a wide-brimmed purple hat.

“Hi Zoe,” Timm said with a big smile, taking off his hat and adjusting the satchel bag over his shoulder. “Taking it easy today, are we?”

Zoe glared at the village’s postman and puffed disheveled hair off her face.

#

Zoe preferred to visit her customers. A walk through the forest dressed in autumn leaves easily refreshed her mind and following the brooks and rivers led her to a mountain pass filled with caves where she could practice which tone of her voice she should use for the customer. Besides, her cottage was too small, too cramped, and simply too unprofessional for a Namer-to-be.

A single pelt decorated the middle of the floor where she slept and worked. There were no chairs but there was a table, sort of. Like a stone mason, she'd stacked her heaviest books like bricks where a worn-out board of a beer keg rested on top, donated by Wyatt when he changed his tavern sign. Scents of leather and parchments wafted through the air, accompanied by the hums of an uneven lid clanging against a pot over a stove top in the corner.

Zoe ushered her guests to sit on the pelt, apologizing for the mess of scrolls piled precariously along a wall. It was a trait she inherited from her mother, who would always apologize about their messy home, even if she'd spent days cleaning it spotless beforehand. Her mother would also always serve the guests a beverage because, in her words, she wasn't a monster.

The Tearless had continued to chatter in Okesh, while Zoe bustled around to be a good host, digging out her stash of assorted tea leaves and trying to remember where she put her cups.

"Ma and Pa were travelers," Poe-Poe said, in between munching on a plum. "They spoke Okesh. No Arzan or Sutha. They went on adventures through all the land-lands. But Ma and Pa sleep-sleep when I baby, leaving boots and name Poe-Poe as treasure. I want to know the meaning but Leader-Leader thinks Poe-Poe is not Okesh."

Zoe frowned over the information. Poe-Poe sounded Okesh enough and also followed the double rule. She had thought it was an older version of ‘poi’ which translated to droplet and doubling it meant rain. Many of the words in Okesh were onomatopoeia, like ‘froh’ sounding like a rumbling fire. Some words were more far-fetched like ‘brich’ supposedly sounding like one’s hand patting on one’s chest, meaning I or me.

“Where did your parents travel?” she asked.

“Everywhere,” Poe-Poe said. *“Skabreesh, Crystal Empire, Dayeron...”* she waved her hands around, pointing at places on an invisible map and almost knocking a pillar of books if not for Timm gently grabbing her hand.

“Careful,” he chided. *“We don’t want to destroy the Namer’s house.”*

Poe-Poe’s ears flattened. In broken Arzan, she said, *“Saw-ree.”*

The postman had nodded along to Poe-Poe’s rambling as if he understood Okesh which Zoe knew he didn’t. He just liked to speak to anyone and everyone, be it a Fearless from Bardo, a Restless from Skabreesh, or elderly people who spent their days staring up at the skies.

“Poe-Poe,” Zoe asked, *“Why did you come here?”*

“In Dayeron, there are Namers who knows all languages,” Poe-Poe explained, *“I took ship to East Seaport, then walk-walk to —”*

“I mean why here,” Zoe explained, *“If you’re looking for a Namer, you should be traveling to the capital.”*

The Tearless pointed at Timm. *“Hat man said there’s a Namer here.”*

The postman grinned a sheepish smile. *“It’s closer to you, isn’t it?”*

“You know I’m not qualified,” Zoe shot back.

“She only wants to know what her name means.”

“Don’t you have letters to deliver?” Zoe asked coldly, as she placed a cup in front of Poe-Poe. “I saw some dark clouds in the distance.”

“I have my hat,” Timm said, “Good against both sun *and* rain. My satchel bag is also waterproof.”

“Farmer Mal thinks it’s going to be a heavy downpour,” Zoe insisted.

“Then I’ll hide in one of the caves,” Timm said simply. “Delays happen all the time, don’t you agree, Poe-Poe?”

They turned to see the Tearless with a blank stare, the cup close to her nose. It would’ve been a still image if not for the twitching ears and the wagging tail.

Timm chuckled. “I think she likes your mint tea.”

Zoe leaned closer to the postman, in a hushed voice she whispered, “She wants to know more than just the meaning behind her name.”

The postman raised an eyebrow. He observed the Tearless, taking in the details that Zoe had already caught on; the hand-me-down clothes of an orphan and the makeshift bag of a runaway.

“It takes five days with a horse from here to Eastern Seaport,” Timm mused. “Ten by foot and judging by the thick dirt crusts on her boots, she’d been walking for a long time.”

Zoe had noticed the dirty boots of the Tearless. She’d worried that they would soil her home but Poe-Poe had cleaned the soles with a shoe brush and entered her home with careful steps. The shoes had only squeaked twice.

“It’s a scaleskin from across the sea,” Timm said. “Isn’t it only decent to tell her what she seeks?”

“Tearless,” Zoe said, “Don’t call them scaleskins and why do *you* care so much?”

“I’m just worried about you, that’s all,” Timm said with a shrug. “You’ve been refusing jobs lately, like helping to name the blacksmith’s newborn son.”

Zoe narrowed her eyes. “How do *you* know about that?”

“Hey, why haven’t you served me any tea?” Timm asked, reaching for Zoe’s stash on the table.

“I can’t find any other cups,” Zoe said. “Are you reading the letters you deliver?”

“A tankard is fine,” Timm said, taking a whiff on the leaves. “Oh, lavender...hey!” He was fast, snapping the whole tea stash shut and holding it threateningly over the bubbling pot. “Pull them down. Slowly.”

Zoe lowering her hands that were about to strangle the postman, “Are you?”

“Some people write poorly,” Timm said as he dipped the tankard into the pot. “My reputation as a postman would be at stake if I delivered letters to the wrong person.”

“Reading letters intended for others *puts* your reputation at stake!”

“What about your reputation?” Timm asked. “A Namer who doesn’t read names?”

“A Namer-to-be,” Zoe corrected. “I tried to read names but it never worked out. There was a stonemason who decided to become a sailor after I told him his name meant ‘pure ocean’.”

“What’s wrong with that?” Timm asked.

“He’d never stepped onto a boat before in his life and he also didn’t know how to swim.”

“He’ll get plenty of experience as a sailor.”

“They get too obsessed with the meaning,” Zoe insisted. “I just want to tell them what their name means, not why they’re named that.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m not qualified!” Zoe almost yelled. “Why do you think I’m slaving away and translating Sutha literature day and night? I need to go back to Everard to learn how to tell people about the why’s!”

“Everard?” A nasal voice spoke in Okesh. “*Magic school?*”

Zoe blinked. “*You know about Everard?*”

The Tearless nodded. “*Leader-leader said that Ma and Pa love Everard. They talked-talked of Everard day and night that Leader-leader banged head against wall.*”

If Poe-Poe’s parents loved to travel the world, then Zoe could understand the excitement for the school of magic. She remembered how her eyes had grown wide with wonder by the mana stones emitting a purple hue and lighting up the academy on moonless nights. She found the teachings of the arcane arts useful but it was the people she missed the most; scholars from all over the world visited the Academy, sharing their languages and cultures. The stalls teased people with foreign blends of spices. There were cellars filled with scriptures written in dead languages from ages past, waiting to be learned once more.

Reminiscing about the Academy made Zoe’s heart ache. She clutched the pendant around her neck, the symbol of being a student of Everard. Her mentor was confident she could become a full-fledged Namer in two more years. If only the tuition wasn’t so high.

Poe-Poe slid her empty cup across the table, tapping the brim lightly with a clawed finger, looking expectantly at Timm.

“It’s only polite to say please, Poe-Poe,” Timm said. “Look at my lips. Puh-lease.”

“Please?” Poe-Poe asked.

“Gladly,” Timm said, pouring from his tankard into the cup. “Do you like it? It’s called mint tea. Mint. Tea.”

“Minty.” Poe-Poe pronounced. “What is minty?”

“It’s those gray things inside,” Timm explained. “That’s because they’re dry but when fresh, they’ve this vibrant green color and smell really nice. Oh...” Timm hesitated, seeing the blank stare of confusion from the Tearless. “Zoe, can you help me translate?”

“Not everything,” Zoe said. “They don’t have words for colors. The Tearless are color-blind.”

“Oh...” Timm looked sad for a moment. “That’s...” He turned to Poe-Poe. “I’m so sorry.”

“It doesn’t have to be a bad thing,” Zoe commented. “The Tearless are known for their songs and poems, right? Many believe that their ability to see the world differently stretches their imagination and creativity.”

Not only did Okesh have no words for colors but there was also a lack of adjectives. Instead of ‘big’ or ‘small’, they would describe it with ‘mountain’ or ‘mouse’. An exact translation wasn’t possible but the more languages Zoe learned, the more she realized that it wasn’t necessary.

“*Poe-Poe*,” she asked in Okesh. “*What does it smell like?*”

Poe-Poe took another whiff of the cup and beamed. “*A night’s breeze!*”

Zoe nodded. “*Mint is a plant with a night’s breeze inside. Its leaves are shaped like spears.*”

“*They don’t look like spears.*”

“*They’re chipped,*” Zoe explained smoothly. “*From defending your mind from tired-tired.*”

Poe-Poe blew the cup a few times before taking another sip. “*I like mint.*”

Zoe couldn’t help but smile watching the Tearless enjoying the beverage.

“See,” Timm said. “You *do* want to help her.”

Zoe grabbed the kettle away from Timm. “I’m *not* going to read her name.”

“What about a simple translation?” Timm suggested. “Can’t you at least do that?”

Zoe hesitated. She could do it. As long as it was from a language she knew of, there was a spell to find out the name's root. But it felt half-hearted somehow, like if a minstrel was tasked to write a song and they only handed over the lyrics without the notes for a melody.

"Will it be enough?" Zoe asked.

"She'll have more than before," Timm replied.

Something tugged Zoe's sleeve and she looked down at Poe-Poe.

"Please?" Poe-Poe asked, holding the cup with both her hands and staring at Zoe with large unblinking eyes of amber.

Timm crouched next to Poe-Poe, mimicking the same expression and looked at Zoe with his own set of misty eyes.

The Namer-to-be threw up her hands in defeat.

#

"It's not a name reading," Zoe repeated. "I'll give you ideas for what your name means. Hint-hint, not name reading. Do you understand?"

Poe-Poe nodded excitedly, which made Zoe regret her decision even more. But she convinced herself that she could sell the boar tusks for a good price during the next market day, so she continued with the procedure of rolling up the pelt and pushing some books to a corner so that there was an empty square they could sit opposite of each other. She'd closed the windows as the sound of rain began to tap the roof and lit a lantern, casting a pale yellow light over the interiors.

"Why are you still here?" Zoe asked, glancing towards the postman who was by the stove, pouring himself another mug of tea.

"I've never seen you work before," he said. "It's usually just you dumping a pile of translations to me as if I was a cart horse."

Zoe opened her mouth to retort but stopped herself. There was no time to be self-conscious. The sooner she got this done, the sooner they would leave. She turned to the Tearless sitting across the floor. *"Can you write?"*

Poe-Poe hesitated. *"In Okesh."*

Zoe pushed the parchment across together with a quill and ink. *"Please write your name here."*

In her mind, she'd already broken down the name in the two repeating syllables, sorting through words in different languages that might match. Poe-Poe's parents seemed to like Everard and Arzan was the main language there. But in Arzan, Poe was a male's name. Its origin stemmed from an older tongue in the north that meant 'peacock'. She couldn't find any reasons for Poe-Poe's parents to name their daughter after a strutting bird.

Poe-Poe finished writing her name. As she turned around the parchment and slid it back to Zoe, the ears of the young Tearless twitched slightly. She hugged her knees, clutching onto the leather of her oversized steel-caps until they let out a squeak.

"What's wrong?" Zoe asked.

Poe-Poe looked at her with a smile filled with anticipation. *"Will there be magic?"*

It was a familiar expression to Zoe. She'd worn it many times in Everard and she couldn't help but mirror it. *"Yes."*

The Namer muttered a word of power. Her ears picked up the soft gasps from Poe-Poe and Timm as a purple sheen seeped out of her body and her vision darkened.

Her consciousness delved into a grand palace, floating up several stairs and through dozens of doors, each one representing a language she knew. A light tug on her sleeve led her to the room of Sutha, spoken by the people in the Crystal Empire. Opening the door, she was welcomed with rows of bookshelves. One of the books shimmered with an enticing glimmer and opening it she read:

*Sutha**Poe-Poe: Not found**Poe: I Result**Poe (noun): Sneeze (verb: Poe-un).*

In the real world, her hand wrote down her findings.

The magic tugged her again and she followed their calls. There was *popo* in Ciril which meant ‘echo’. In Tamalu, the prefix *pou* meant ‘before’. She found ‘peacock’ and ‘clap’ and ‘thundercloud’. Her puzzlement grew with each discovery. Usually, the tugging of her spell was firm and taut but now it jerked hesitantly, unsure of the name’s origin.

She muttered another word of power, allowing her magic to search with a wider interpretation and immediately she felt a strong pull, leading her towards the room of Okesh.

She hesitated, recalling Poe-Poe mentioning that the name wasn’t in the Tearless language. Still, her spell forced her inside and pulled her to open another glinting book.

Her real body stiffened, knuckles turning white as she tried to stop writing down the information. But her magic pushed ink on paper.

Then the tugging dragged her away, ushering her to other places for more suggestions, each one growing more far-fetched than the last. It grew more erratic, leading her back to rooms she’d already been in, repeating the same findings. It began to pick up speed, not waiting for her anymore. She had to end the spell but she feared what Poe-Poe would see.

Zoe hurried on, her feet slapping against the floor of her mind’s palace to keep up with her spell’s insistence. She delved into languages from across the continent, poured herself into dead languages she’d only seen in texts, but nothing seemed to click with

‘Poe-Poe.’ Her vision spun, flashing white from the growing headache, and she slipped, tumbling onto the ground, her mind reeling and crashing.

She blinked. Sweat ran down her brow. She was in her cottage. The quill was still in her hand.

Timm was next to her, his arms hovering around her as if about to shake her. “By the Greater and the Old, Zoe,” he said. “Are you alright?”

Liquid trickled down her nose and her tongue tasted blood. She wiped it away with a sleeve and noticed Poe-Poe staring at the parchment filled with suggestions in twelve different languages, but the Tearless was focused only on the part Zoe had written in Okesh.

Poe: Not found

Poe-Poe: Not found.

Suggestion: Combine with Sutha

Poe (Sutha): Sneeze

Jagg (Okesh): Sneeze

Jagg-Jagg (Okesh): Disease.

“Disease?” the goblin murmured. “My name means disease?”

“A mistake,” Zoe said quickly. “No, I made a mistake-mistake.” She tried to stand up but found her legs drained of strength.

“Timm.” Her head hurt and each word she spoke made her nauseous. “Timm, help her.”

Even though Zoe had spoken in Okesh, Timm sensed the intent. He turned towards the Tearless. “Poe-Poe?” he asked, reaching out with a hand. “How are you?”

The small figure became a blur, slipping past Timm’s hand and dashing towards Zoe with outstretched claws.

The floor shook as the postman slammed Poe-Poe to the ground, pinning her by the neck.

“Easy, Poe-Poe,” he said. “Calm down. Don’t do anything you’ll regret later.”

The Tearless let out a shriek. She kicked and flailed to break free but her small stature was no match against Timm’s larger size. The pupils in her eyes had shrunk to beads, staring accusingly at Zoe.

The image horrified Zoe. She needed to fix this but her mind was blanking from exhaustion and her tongue was too scared to move.

Poe-Poe’s cloak fluttered. Her tail struck Timm in the eye and the postman let out a grunt. The attack had been enough for Poe-Poe to slip through the postman’s grip, and she sank her jaw into Timm’s arm. The postman yelled. He crashed his arm against the wall with such force that the pillars of books began to wobble.

Poe-Poe slid off the wall with a whine.

“Oh no,” Timm said, hurrying forward. “Poe-Poe, I’m sorry”

The Tearless’ ears twitched. Her face twisted in anger and her claws dug into the postman’s leg. She slipped between Timm’s hands and spun a kick onto a pillar of paper, toppling it and sending parchments flying.

The scent of smoke invaded Zoe’s nostrils.

“Timm!” she shouted. “The stove!”

The postman was already on it, stomping away the flames that began to chew on paper, all the while Zoe doused her stove.

The door slammed open and Zoe turned to see the Tearless grab the cloth bag by the door. Poe-Poe gave her one last look of hurt before limping out into the rain, the steel toe caps whimpering against the gravel.

#

Heavy rain pattered against the thatched roof, blending in together with the hissing sound of the cooled-off coals. Inside, light still flickered from a lantern, casting a pale glow across singed books and buckled tomes as Zoe finished treating Timm's leg.

"It looks worse than it is," Timm said, wiggling his toes.

"As long as you don't put any weight on it," Zoe said. She'd wrapped the postman's left arm in linen and spread some ointment on a nasty bruise across his cheek. "You sure you don't want old Edith to come and take a look?" she asked.

"I'll be fine with a good night's sleep," Timm said, spreading himself out on the pelt. His jovial expression dimmed as his eyes met with the Namer's. "You know it's not your fault."

Zoe looked away. Next to her was the parchment where she'd written down the suggestions. Her fingers traced over the words in Okesh. "I told her that she's an unwanted child."

"You didn't." Timm winced as he pushed himself to a sitting position. "You never got a chance to explain. It's not your fault."

"Why do you even care?" Zoe said. "If you didn't insist on me helping her, this whole thing wouldn't have happened." Immediately, she regretted her words. Timm might've instigated it but the choice had been hers alone.

"Did you see her shoes?"

"The steel toe boots? Yeah, they hurt."

"They also squeak," Timm said simply.

When Zoe didn't say anything, he continued. "I'm on my feet most of the day, delivering letters to people so I know a thing or two about shoes. Poe-Poe's shoes squeak because they're too big for her."

"They're probably her father's or mother's shoes," Zoe said.

"Wearing shoes too big for you is not good," Timm explained. "It causes abrasion on the heel."

Zoe remembered how slowly the Tearless had entered her home. She'd thought it had been due to the new surroundings and not wanting to bump into any books or step on parchment.

"She was already limping when I first met her," Timm said, "asking for 'Namer' to whoever she met. I offered to add some pad her shoes but she refused to take them off."

She remembered how Poe-Poe had hugged the shoes, relaxing when they let out a squeak.

In Okesh, the language of the Tearless, the most common greeting was *brich' sah laving*. It meant 'I hear you'.

"I couldn't help sending her to you," Timm said. "I didn't expect this to happen." His shoulders sagged as he let out a deep sigh. "Do you think her parents really hated her?"

"Of course not," Zoe said. "Why would they show their hate in such a roundabout way, mixing Sutha with Okesh's double rule? But the same can be said about their love. Why couldn't they have named their child something simpler?"

"Love is much harder to translate than hate," Timm said, "and also much easier to misinterpret. You don't know how many letters I've read that sounded like death threats when they were just banters of affection."

"There's something wrong with her name," Zoe insisted. "There was no direct translation. My spell couldn't even find a word in any language with that combination of

syllables, just a guess-work. Something's missing and it's infuriating. It's... it's..." She lowered her head, shoulders trembling and hands gathered into fists on her lap.

Timm reached out with a hand, ready to wrap Zoe in a hug when the Namer suddenly began to screech. The sounds were guttural and menacing. Each line she spoke, the lights from the stove and lantern seemed to grow dimmer. As the Namer finished her speech, thunder crackled outside.

"What in twenty-seven Hells was that?" Timm demanded. He'd pushed himself almost to the wall.

"Draconic," Zoe said. "Best language to vent in." She always felt better after cursing in exotic languages.

"How do you even start pronouncing those things?" Timm asked.

"It took me a while. You need to ease your throat into it or else the pronunciation... will..." Zoe's eyes lit up. "That's it!" She grabbed for the parchment, her eyes frantically going through each suggestion. "It was in Arzan!"

Her mind was alight, lifted from the daze of exhaustion and connecting the puzzle. She walked around the room, digging through the papers and unearthing her stash of tea and her bag of plums. With a lantern in hand, she opened the door only to be met with the cold air and the chatter of heavy rain.

A sound made her turn to see Timm unclasp his satchel bag and empty its content on the ground.

"Just take it," Timm said. "I'm sure you'll need my hat too."

"Thank you, Timm."

There was still time, Poe-Poe couldn't have gone far with injured feet. Just like the postman, the Tearless would've sought shelter under a tree or in a cave, and between the two options Zoe was certain which Poe-Poe would take.

Zoe could barely hear her own breath. The rain hammered down on her, soaking through her leggings and boots as she hurried down the road until she met the brook that would lead her to the caves by the river. The cold bit her fingers but it only made her grasp the lantern harder and nestle the satchel bag closer to her chest.

The shadows of the mountain pass soon loomed over her. She held her lantern high, searching through the crevices for a sign of the Tearless.

"Poe-Poe?" Zoe shouted.

There was no reply. Even if the Tearless had heard, Zoe wasn't sure if she would've answered.

She caught a glint. A refraction against her lantern light. At first, she'd thought it was from the river water but her heart sank when she noticed a pair of abandoned steel-toed boots.

There was a cave close by. Too small for Zoe but perfect for a young child. Her suspicions were confirmed when she spotted puddles inside.

Zoe had to crawl on her knees to get in, shuffling deeper with the lantern first, shining a cramped passage that soon opened up enough for her to walk with a hunched posture until she met with a pair of amber eyes.

The Tearless sat slumped with her back against a wall. Her arms hugged a wet cloth bag and her feet were red with blood. She looked so tired, not even having the strength to summon a scowl onto the approaching Namer.

"Leave," Poe-Poe whispered.

Zoe placed the lantern between them and sat down. *"You dropped your treasure."* She presented the steel toed boots.

"Leave," Poe-Poe repeated. She switched to Arzan and said, "Please."

"Your name doesn't mean disease," Zoe said. *"Your parents love you."*

The Tearless moved. She grabbed the boots and flung them at Zoe but missed, the boots tumbled onto the ground, clanging. She was breathing heavy, her expression a mix of hurt and rage.

They held each other's gaze. Only a fool would try to outstare a Tearless but Zoe refused to budge.

"I'll read your name," she said calmly. *"Your true name"* She removed Timm's wide-brimmed hat from her head and placed it next to the lantern.

The Tearless scoffed. *"Poe-Poe means hat?"*

"The word doesn't exist in Okesh," Zoe said. *"In Arzan, it sounds-sounds Purple."*

The Tearless wavered. *"Poe-Pull?"*

"Pur-ple." Zoe repeated, carefully enunciating the word.

She chided herself for not realizing sooner. The parent's infatuation with Everard should've been the greatest clue. Nothing represented the school better than the purple mana stones. But foreign words were not only mistranslated but also mispronounced. It was so obvious in hindsight.

"Purple." The Tearless tasted the word. Finally, she broke away from the stare, focusing on the hat. *"What does it mean?"*

"Touch it," Zoe inquired.

Small hands brushed against the wet felt. *"It's like moss after rain,"* the Tearless murmured. *"Is that what Purple means?"*

"It can be," Zoe said. She opened the satchel bag, presenting a plum and her stash of lavender tea. *"These are also purple."*

"How?" The Tearless tilted her head. *"Why?"*

Slowly, the Namer lifted the hat and put it on the Tearless. It was already too big for Zoe and it would've sank down to the Tearless' chin if not for the flattened ears. It was still too heavy and tilted the Tearless' head forward.

"Purple feels like standing before kings and queens," Zoe said. *"It tastes like plum and smells of lavender tea."* She muttered a word of power and her magic seeped out. *"It sounds like the gasps of someone seeing magic for the first time."*

The Tearless tried to touch the purple sheen but found nothing there. It oozed out of Zoe like a gentle steam.

"This is why your name is Purple," Zoe said. She went and picked up the steel toed boots and put them next to the Tearless. *"Because seeing you was like seeing Everard for the first time."*

"Everard..." The Tearless murmured slowly. *"Purple means magic?"*

"That's what you mean to your Ma and Pa."

Zoe watched as the child hugged her treasure tight to her chest. The water spilled out and splashed onto clothes and eyes but a Tearless couldn't blink. Instead, her lips quivered, and her ears pressed flat against her head as she gave the steel-toed boots a tighter hug.

"Brich' sah laving," Purple whispered. *"Brich' sah laving, Ma. Pa. Brich' sah laving,"*

#

There was a Tearless ambling near Zoe's cottage. At first, she'd thought it was Timm due to the purple hat but then she noticed that it was a smaller version of the postman's hat and then there was the tail swaying from under the figure's cloak.

"Travel the world?" Zoe asked in Okesh. *"Why not stay longer? I can teach you a bit of Arzan and Sutha."*

Purple shook her head while adjusting the shoulder straps of her new rucksack. She'd stayed in the village for almost two weeks, helping Timm deliver letters as an apology, and foraging herbs and plants for Zoe.

"I want to know more about Ma and Pa," she said, looking down at her polished steel toecaps, padded and squeakless. *"See what they saw, feel what they felt. I want to walk where they walked."* She gave a deep bow. *"Thank you for reading my name."*

"You paid for it," Zoe said, tugging on her necklace where two new boar tusks decorated each side. *"Next autumn, I'll be in Everard,"* she said. *"I can show you the mana stones if you find yourself there by then."*

The Tearless' eyes glittered. *"A promise to show Purple magic?"*

"No," Zoe smiled. *"A promise-promise to show Purple colors."*