

The girl felt the sun's gaze on her skin one final time. It hung high in the cloudless sky, and the heat diffused her mind with haze. She left the village in this half-conscious state, unable to feel herself past the confines of her thoughts. She moved down the dusty, uneven footpath; past spindly tree branches; towards the temple at the edge of the forest. The heat of the day was searing. For today, she was to fulfill her purpose and do what she had been born to: die.

Today. Her final responsibility.

She remembered the aides shepherding her and the other girls in her birth cohort into the learning hall when they had reached the age of four, sitting on the floor with their legs crossed, their knees touching, and their palms to the cold, hard marble. For the next twelve years, a priest would come in to teach them. He taught many things, though the ones that stuck with her were the lessons on the history of their people. How they fled from the warring mainland and took refuge on an island far out to sea. How they persisted through disease and disaster, carving out a place where they could live without fear. Even then she heard the message echoing in between the spaces of his words: this was not a home they could afford to lose.

It was very difficult, replacing a home. They left the mainland a whole people but arrived here halved. It was almost certain that losing what little they had now would put a definitive end to the clan. But individual lives? They were as temporary as a shooting star crossing the night. And really, what made her sacrifice any different than that of those who never made it across the sea in the first place?

She was before the temple now, blue dress fluttering against her body as she stared at the weathered stone steps. His Holiness, the head priest, had said to her during the parting ceremony: “before the afternoon sun sinks under the weight of nightfall, you must meet the Keeper”.

The way he had said that word. *Keeper*. His voice turning hollow with reverence, a common occurrence among the old folk whenever they spoke of the beast. They were the last generation to see It in person—when they were no older than she was the day the priests brought her to the monastery. Because of this, they had not the dull doubtfulness of their children, who had only heard the tale secondhand, nor the disinterest of their children’s children, who either considered themselves too old for stories or could pull from their imagination something much more creative than a giant, talking guard dog.

There was one thing they all shared, though. To them, the Keeper, as well as everything that had ever happened to their people in the past, would never be more than a story. So long as the deal was maintained. So long as she did her part. The girl reached a hand to the chain cutting into her neck, fingers wrapping around the blue stone that hung there. And squeezed.

She ascended the stairs. The courtyard at the top was overflowing. Leafy hedges lining the temple walls, shin-high blades of grass brushing her skin as she passed, and a flourish of blue flowered bushes wreathing a statue of a girl. The statue was on its knees, sightless eyes turned downwards; its face was carved so delicately that the girl could tell they were meant to be the same age. The stone was hued blue, in a shade that matched her necklace.

Before the statue stood the priest with his back to her. His head was bowed, as if mimicking the statue's acquiescent stance. Assuming he was in prayer, the girl clasped her hands behind her back and waited for him to finish.

Time passed. He did not move.

She set her lips. It wasn't as if she had been particularly quiet coming up here. He should have heard her on the steps.

He did not move.

Her mouth firmed. It was imperative the escorting priest proceeded the moment she arrived. She did not imagine His Holiness would be pleased with this delay.

Unless he was waiting for her to call out to him.

The girl burrowed her eyes into the priest's back and felt from the very depths of her soul an unwelcome feeling. A feeling she had been fighting back for weeks in anticipation of today. But the meditations, the communions with the head priest, the long stretches of fasting and prayer, all seemed to crumble when presented with this one moment—insignificant really, a senile waste of space without the balls to lead the way forward like the leader he purported himself to be, in the ceremony that they say is necessary. What a waste, oh, what a waste. To have spent so much time cultivating peace only for the fire to return within a second of resistance, no weaker than if she had done nothing at all. The red-hot feeling threatened to engulf her.

Wind hissed through the flowers and the leaves. The girl stood, straight-backed. Her nails dug deep into her palms until the tides were finally receding from her mind, and she could once again see with clarity. The priest still had not moved. He would never move. She knew it deep in her heart, better than she knew what else lay in there. You must understand this to know why, eventually, she gave in and called out to him.

"Yes, yes," he said dismissively, and she felt her heart hitch. Not sparing her even the slightest look, the priest stepped around the fountain towards the temple doors. A fire pit sat before it, throwing weak orange light onto the floor. Lighting a torch from the flames, he walked to the great doors and pulled them open until she could stare straight into the temple's cavernous throat.

“Come,” said the priest. They entered, and the doors shut behind them.

They moved through the dark in an orb of light. The girl kept her eyes fixed on the wall of blackness before her. Shadows prowled round the edges of her vision, and the moist air was like breath creeping down her spine.

“Are you afraid?”

She took a moment; then, pulling from an old lecture collecting dust in the back of her mind, the girl said: “It is better if we go in peace. There is no need to make our final moments so tortured.”

“And you are not tortured now?”

The girl kept her face carefully blank. “I am saving my village.”

She waited for him to say something generic and pious, such as ‘praise be’ or ‘your faith will be rewarded’.

Instead: “But are you saying you’re not even the least bit scared?”

Her fingers shook slightly. She threaded them together. “There is no need. It is for the good of the village,” the girl said.

The torch’s glow brushed a pillar and the priest stopped, resting his hand on it. “The good of the village...”

For a while, they didn’t move. The silence thrummed as if it were a heartbeat, and her own heart joined in chorus. If only she knew what time it was. It was unlikely any answer would soothe her, but it had to be a thousand times better than simply not knowing. The longer she stood here, the more she felt she was being stretched between two moments. And thinning, thinning into her barest thread.

“Sir,” she began and caught herself, for she did not know what drove her to speak.

The priest regarded her.

She shifted. “Mustn’t we move on soon?”

The priest blinked. “I’ve never known anyone to want to rush something like this.”

“There doesn’t seem to be much point in waiting. As the head priest says, ‘Idle minds are dangerous minds’.”

“And you believe that?”

She hesitated. “Why wouldn’t I?”

“I’m interested in hearing what *you* think. Not the head priest.”

“It won’t do to bother a man of faith with the ramblings of a child,” said the girl.

“As someone who rambles for a living, I’d be quite honored to listen.”

“Why, pray tell?”

“I am trying to put myself in your shoes.” He smiled—more of a grimace, in fact.

Her heart twisted. “In my shoes?”

“You’re in an... interesting position. The scholar in me can’t help but be curious.”

So she was his caged creature, a thing to gasp and poke and gawk at.

“I would like to try my hand at guessing what is running through your mind right now. Come. We can walk as I do so.”

They set off at a steady pace.

“If I were you,” he began, “I would be thinking of all the things I would miss. Like sailing. Always did it for fun, you see. My grandfather built the habit into me. He was a fisherman, and he used to take me out to sea with him when I was a boy. Eons ago for you, I’m sure.”

He paused, glanced at her as if expecting a laugh, then awkwardly continued.

“Oh yes, the smell of sea salt in the breeze, the sparkling blue waves... I would miss it dearly.”

She rubbed her blue-gauze sleeves, suddenly cold.

“What would you miss?”

A powerful wave of resentment hit her, like before in the gardens. Her wits were with her now though, and they chided her for the slip-up. She was in the presence of a priest. What had all those years of discipline been for if not this moment?

“The library,” the girl said.

“A well-read young miss. I’m partial to the philosophical musings of the greats myself. It’s how I survived into priesthood, although the tomes we were forced to read test even those most dedicated.”

This time she caught the cue to laugh, managing a small chuckle, and he smiled in a satisfied manner.

“I’m afraid I haven’t read much philosophy,” the girl said. “You’ll not find me a very rewarding conversational partner.” She waited for his hearty agreement, or better, a lecture that would have him going on for hours, drowning away the empty space silence would leave.

But instead he said, “what did you read?”

“I doubt Your Eminence will be entertained by such a question.”

“Nonsense. I’m all ears.”

“Well...” Her lips folded and her gaze fell to the dimly lit flagstones upon which they trod. “I am fond of stories. Made up stories, whatever the kind. Swashbucklers, romances, epics. They excite the imagination. To think someone could be out there, doing that.” A chill passed through her dress and she rubbed at her sleeves harder.

“Stories?” said the priest with a laugh. “Rather frivolous, is it not?”

He chuckled again, and she felt her neck grow hot with that nasty feeling.

“But that is age-appropriate, I suppose.” He paused for a spell, then said, “what else did you do?”

“Would Your Eminence be impressed by anything I might say?”

The priest gave her a strange look. “I suppose not. But you shouldn’t be trying to. We’re simply getting to know each other. So. Any hobbies? Interests? *Friends*?”

“There were some very beautiful tapestries on display in the corridors that I liked to admire,” the girl said blandly.

“Tapestries? That’s all?”

She did not answer.

“Did you not at least talk to the other girls?”

“Not much,” she said. Her neck and now her ears burned restlessly.

“Why not-”

“Because it’s pointless.”

He stopped.

Her skin was a forest ablaze. Good sense urged her to shut her mouth, but it had either grown too weak, or her audacity too strong.

“At least you know the tapestries will stay on the walls.”

A chill silence swamped the air. She watched the cheekbones of the priest’s face work. With release, the heat lifted from her skin, and now she was left with the cold recognition of what she had done. Inside her, something quivered in anticipation of rebuke.

“Of course,” the priest said. His shoulders sagged into a sigh, and he moved on. She was being given grace. It was impossible to fathom why when she had been clearly belligerent, but blessings should not be questioned. So, the girl said nothing and followed, and in the ensuing silence, relief bloomed across her chest. At the very least, those awful questions would cease.

At some indeterminable point, a stray gust blew in and snuffed their torch light. “This happens quite often,” said the priest, voice distant as if he were mentally elsewhere, “just stick close to me.” His indifference seemed ridiculous to her. The deeper they went, the thicker the darkness grew. It came to a point where she could not rely on sight at all. Like before, the control she had built over the course of her sixteen years collapsed. A few minutes in these conditions, and she was convinced she would never see again. She should have been embarrassed by the extent of her hysteria, but the darkness had seeped fully into her mind now, and it was only the priest’s footsteps beside her that kept her from bolting like a frightened horse.

It was footsteps too that clued her in to the end. The floor was sticky. Just a little, at first, and the sensation was queer enough to distract her from her panic. But then the smell set in, and she knew why.

The smell. A heavy, gamey stench staining the area. It pulled her back to one of the few times she left the monastery for the village on the other side of the forest, the part that still lived. While traveling, she stumbled across a half-eaten corpse of a deer and the smell...

Only here that smell was quiet. Quiet in the way the head priest was and the village head wasn’t. Quiet in a way that spoke of power. A power that stole breath from both girl and priest as they approached torchlight framing towering gates and a dais whose topmost surface was smeared with red.

He stopped her. Offering no explanation, he walked alone to the dais and stooped before it, touching a finger to its surface and staring.

“So it must be,” said the priest. He rose, half-turned. The light of the torches threw his face in shadow.

The girl was to follow with ‘so it shall’. But she could not make her lips move into the shapes needed to produce the words. She swallowed thickly and tried, but to no avail. Her lungs—why would they not work as they were supposed to? The priest stared at her, waiting. Through his eyes she could see the question he wasn’t asking. The blue stone grew heavy against her chest.

Then, abruptly, he said: “I’m due home after this. I’ll see my wife and my child, and we’ll have supper. Later, I’ll go out to sea, as I always do after a difficult day. What would you do if you could leave?”

“I...” said the girl, “I don’t know what you mean.”

“I’m asking what you would do if you lived another day.”

He needed to stop. She felt she would choke if he did not stop.

“Well?”

“Please don’t talk of such things, sir,” she said shakily, “I beg of you.”

“If you could just-”

She fell to his feet. “Sir, I beg of you! Just let me have peace. Do you want me to grovel? Is that it? Will that get you to leave me alone?”

The priest stood over her as she shivered and whimpered—a wretched thing. She expected to see disgust or the toe of his shoe before it hit her face. But instead she heard a sigh and felt hands gently but firmly grip her shoulders. She opened her eyes to his.

“It is only now that I realize what we’ve done to you. At first I only saw the surface and its simplicity, and so I wanted to grant you what I thought you needed—counting on that simplicity to give me the courage I lacked. But it was nothing but a mirage, and I was foolish to believe in it. I will have to build my courage on something stronger.” He pulled her up and wiped her wet cheeks. “Besides,” he smiled, “if things were so simple, then I suppose we would not be here at all.”

She blinked at him through tears. He dug a hand into the depths of his robes and pulled out a key on a chain, putting it around her neck. The key clinked against the blue stone. “There is

a door,” he started, “at the back of the courtyard. It opens only to this key, so be sure to lock it behind you. I’m leaving behind something to help. May it one day fill you with as much joy as it has filled me with.”

“Sir?” she sniffed.

The priest fitted the torch in her palm, wrapping her fingers around the rough wood. He looked her in the eye again. A waning orange dot, the flame, shone in his pupils.

Another smile, this one fraying at its edges. “Let this be my last act of faith.”

And he walked away. He went up the steps and froze just before his shoe would touch the dais. Then he let it fall, and the flagstones underneath began to shudder. As the gates creaked open, the priest sat down on the dais with his back to her.

At first she didn’t move.

Then, a step back.

Another.

Then another and another and another.

She ran. She ran as fast as her legs could carry her, ran until she tripped over them, dropping the torch, scrambling blindly to her feet as the stone beneath her shook with a drone she could feel to her heart, until she hit smooth wood, groping around to make sure this was the way out, and she pushed it open and stumbled out so quickly she fell and skinned her knee. She looked up-

And there was the sun. Light, pouring into the courtyard. Filling her vision with gold. She sat there, sat for so long the pain of her scraped knee ebbed away. The thinking brain and feeling heart had both paused, forgetting to function, and in that moment all she could do was sit, and let the warmth caress her.

A sudden roar of flames drew her out of her trance. The fire pit had gone from a guttering orange to a brilliant green.

So the priest was dead.

And she was alive.

Her faculties returned at once, in a horrible flood. Body shaking, rattling, she shot to her feet and pulled and pulled at the lock. But the doors would open no longer. She kept pulling



anyway. *The priest was dead, and she was alive.* As if letting herself fall apart wasn't awful enough!

Pulling and pulling, even as her arms grew light with weakness, even when she could manage no more than slight tugs at the door's handle. She would not let it end like this. She would make this right. She *had* to make this right.

She exhausted herself and slumped against the wood, wetting it with her tears. Of all the selfish, thoughtless things she could have done. Her mind in shambles, the girl sought the rationality of her upbringing; perhaps she could remedy her mistake. *Somehow.*

Just then, voices arose from the forest of dead trees, and her crying ceased at once. The Watchers. Here to make sure she had done her duty.

She looked at the key he had given her. The door at the back of the courtyard—it existed. It led to a staircase plunging into darkness. And it was here her body betrayed her again, moving into the dark, its shoulders brushing against the cratered walls. Refusing to answer when she asked it, what are you doing, why are you doing this, how could you do this? Ignoring her cries until it came across a fissure in the rock, and together, they stumbled onto the coast. She looked up from shell-studded sand to see something beached ashore. A boat.

Warily, she approached the vessel. Inside were ropes, a fishing rod, and a chest. Her hands wandered the chest's small interior and fished out a weathered, yellowed map. Old, except for the fresh ink painting a trail from their island to the mainland. She traced a finger on it—thinking of the priest and how quickly the trial ended. Thinking, did he suffer in those last moments? She thought, and another wave of guilt crashed over her and brought her to her knees.

The sun was beginning to set once she had gathered herself well enough to keep going. The surf splashed against the boat's sides as she pushed it forward, saltwater stinging the wound on her knee. Once thigh deep, she swung herself inside, pushed off with an oar and rowed. Now the first few stars of the night shone in the sky, opening their eyes to her. She met their twinkling gaze, their infinite beauty, and drew her first true breath in all the years of her life.

The island drifted, and drifted, and drifted. Until it was gone, and she was alone.