

On the outskirts of Stonewing, a few miles away from Meteor Lake, Calliope was resting. She had her van packed up, and was making her way to Stonewing on a hunch. Ever since those wisps had appeared last year, she'd been having this increasingly powerful feeling that she was being watched.

Not all the time, mind you, but enough that she was beginning to feel the strings of paranoia cling to her fur. She was on a job, though. A very important one, and while she'd had her fair share of difficult conversations, she was certain she was making headway.

So certain, in fact, that she had brought Endymion along. Normally, she left him to his own devices, and would provide updates on a biweekly basis at an agreed place, but he was traveling with her to Stonewing, and she couldn't be more excited.

"I really think this is the final stop," Calliope explained, leaning back in her foldout chair. She curled her claws through her long supple tendrils and they wrapped around her fingers absently. "I was getting a lot of weird feelings in Stonewing last time I was here, so I think this might be where your lantern is."

Endymion's body was folded on the top of her van. He was enormous, his hefty weight making the whole vehicle sag, a light purple mound of flesh and fur. The entire length of his tail curled around the van, for it would not fit up there with him. It was easily thirty feet long, and had the appearance of a sky at dusk. The tip of it was at Calliope's feet, and she rested them on it as it twitched in anticipation.

"You are certain?" Endymion didn't mean to sound doubtful, but Calliope had had a few false alarms in the past.

Well, that wasn't entirely true. She had been led to places in Uto several times, but those ended up being museums and galleries that no longer carried - or remembered hosting - an old lantern in their stock. Endymion hated how they referred to his most prized possession as "stock", and the mere memory of it made his twitching morph from anticipation to anger.

He found himself getting angry at a lot of things lately. For reasons that he could not understand. He didn't remember being this agitated before, and Calliope had very little in the way of advice for it. She was a finder, not a therapist.

"Yes," Calliope said. "It is in Stonewing. I haven't felt such a strong pull before, and I even had it verified by a Gravent associate of mine. It was in transit last they heard, but their information is good."

"How long until we are there?" Endymion asked, shifting in place.

The van whined in response, rocking back and forth, and Calliope couldn't help but wince. She certainly hoped that the damages wouldn't be too expensive, as Endymion was a crownless vagabond and the service he would provide in exchange was only going to be useful a handful of times.

"We have a few more stops along the way," she replied, stretching. Endymion's tail thumped underfoot. "I have something that I need to have checked out first. And the van is going to need air again."

"Sorry."

"I'm not upset."

Endymion rolled off the roof with a surprising level of dexterity considering how wide he was, and he landed a lot more softly than Calliope expected. He had to circle the van a few

times to uncurl his tail and return to her side, where he plopped down. He seemed more somber.

"I have been thinking a lot," Endymion said sadly. "About our journey."

"It hasn't been that long," Calliope shotback in an attempt to soothe him. It had only been a few weeks, and for most of that time, Endymion hadn't been with her. "I'd hardly call it a journey."

"It feels like one to me." Endymion sighed and ran his hand over a section of his tail. The fur was plush and thick, and flattened easily against his palm. "A lot of the people are not kind."

"What do you mean?"

"I am not sure," Endymion admitted. "I don't think I have the words for it, I'm afraid. I can just sense it. Meanness. Maybe also something else. I think they do not like us."

The air between them grew tense. Calliope had been aware of the off vibes from some of the other Skireans they'd spoken to, but nothing as sinister as "meanness". It was mostly indifference, and mostly from CCCats, their cousin species. She hadn't felt welcomed, per se, but she hadn't felt specifically unwelcome either.

"I like us," she said.

This seemed to make Endymion relax, even if only minutely. He gave her a forlorn look that read of a Crook much much older than he spoke and conducted himself. But all the connective tissue was missing, and Calliope felt strange about it. Still, she liked Endymion well enough.

"I really appreciate what you are doing." Endymion remained seated as Calliope got up and went to the opened van door. She pulled out a couple bottles of soda and tossed one to Endymion. "You are very generous. I am happy that you do not think I am lying to you."

"You're talking like something bad is going to happen," Calliope said, cracking the bottle open. She dropped the bottle cap into a small bag hanging from a hook just inside the door, and it jingled against hundreds of others. "And I already told you that trust is a two way street. I trust you so that you will trust me. There is more to life than hustling for crowns. At least I think so. And, besides, I've been having fun."

"What kind of fun?"

Calliope shrugged. "It's more of a general vibe. I feel lighter, more hopeful. If that makes sense. That's kind of why I went into this line of work after all. To see sights and meet people. To find stuff. To be helpful." She paused, arching a brow, the corner of her lips turning up into a wry smile. "Am I being helpful?"

"Oh, yes, Ms. Calliope!" He exclaimed, nodding his head vigorously. It made his ears flap against his head even though they were so short. "You are very helpful! I would never have been able to walk all the way to Uto or Stonewing by myself. And I promise that I will share my magic with you when I have my lantern back. To go wherever you want to go. For free! No money required."

"That's how a trade works, Endymion." Calliope drained her soda in a few quick gulps and tossed the empty bottle into a bin just under the bag of bottle caps. "And at this point, I'm more curious than anything. And I'm sure my friend is too."

"Friend?"

Calliope nodded and twirled a finger in the air. "I've been in tune with the world for as long as I've formed, and I think I picked up an incorporeal friend at some point. The longer I

work on this lantern project, the more I am convinced that my little friend is not just my normal attunement.”

”Like a g-ghost?” Endymion shrank a little.

She made a noncommittal gesture with her hand. “I don’t know. I don’t know if ghosts are real, but it happened when we were in the Glass Desert. Remember the wisps?”

Endymion did, indeed, remember the wisps. It had been a harrowing night, and he had been mostly afraid of them, even if he had put on a brave face. A Whick had come along and asked for their help to guide the souls of the dead. It had, at least, gotten Calliope on the trail of his lantern, so he couldn’t be too upset at the memory even if it had been terrifying.

”Do you think it’s a wisp?” He asked hesitantly.

”I don’t know,” Calliope replied. “Maybe? It’s the best I got, but the wisps weren’t really doing anything at the time. Maybe it is something else.” Her smile grew wider. “A ghost, or a banshee. Maybe it is a demon. Ooo, scary!”

She wiggled her fingers sinisterly, throwing scary whispers over Endymion’s shoulders. He shuddered and flicked his ears.

”Not funny, what if it is a demon? Aren’t those bad?”

Calliope giggled and flopped back into her foldout chair. “I think there are much scarier things than demons. I could handle it, I think.”

”What makes you say that?” Endymion didn’t mean to stare at her so intently. “You are so small. They could be giant and step on you. Or grab you like an ice cream cone.”

Calliope laughed. It was loud and sweet, and made some birds from the nearby trees fly off in a hurry. Endymion’s ears stayed flat against his head, and his hands grasped for a shepherd’s crook that wasn’t there.

”I’m serious,” he cried. “What would you do if it was a demon? I don’t want you to be hurt.”

When Calliope sobered up, she wiped tears from the corners of her eyes and she finally caught her breath enough to answer him.

”I know I don’t look like the typical Banished Crook, but I was there for long enough,” she explained with a shocking amount of nonchalance. “I’ll just trip the demon and run away.”

”Good plan,” Endymion said. “That’s a good plan. I will do the same thing.”

Calliope snickered again. “Yeah, use your tail and then you can teleport away.”

”I don’t have my lantern, though.”

”You’ll have it,” Calliope promised.

”Oh, okay.” A long pause. “Then can I teleport us both away?”

”Yeah. Yeah, you can do that.”