

Chapter 1

A gentle breeze cascaded across thick lush meadows. Wildflowers climbing toward the early morning sun, specs of vibrant yellows, blues and purples scattered among soft green grass. As the wind picks up, the ground stirs. The flora shudders, stones quivering at their base as dirt fragments faintly. Footsteps barrel forward, the beauty a mere hurdle as they stumble through. Another follows suit, the ground rumbles, churns, buckling under a much heftier weight.

“WHAT DID YOU DO!?” An angry voice rings out, battling the deafening sounds from behind. A cloak flows across their back, head down, covered in thin black fabric. Belts jingle at the hips with each stride, loosely fitted on similarly black pants. Arms bare, swinging wildly in an attempt to push them forward with each ragged breath. A tan tank top loosely hanging on his chest while a red stoned necklace gleamed in the sun.

“This is a great morning workout”

A woman's voice came from his left. The response irked him, fist clenched as the rumbling grew closer. **“WHAT PART OF THIS IS GREAT!?”** he screamed. His steps slow enough for a large shadow to consume his form. A tusk, thick as his thigh grazed his back, hooking on the cloak floating behind him. His heart stopped while his feet lifted from the ground, lungs screaming without input. A mass of tattered brown fur, protruding bone held him in place, the boy hung close to its open snout, a stench so vile his hair stood on end.

Gravity tore the fabric at its edge, dropping the boy to the floor, pure fear forced him forward the moment his soles touched dirt. Swiftly he returned to his companion's side, adrenaline high. **“Stop whining or I'll leave you behind”**. Her words shattered his thoughts, feet skid to a halt, hand gripping her shoulder as both were now at a standstill.

“This is your mess! Why am I getting caught up in it!?” his heart in his throat as the impending beast was drawing ever nearer. Her bright yellow eyes dart in its direction, blue hair brushing past her light skinned face. The frustration of her companion began boiling. A brief steam flying off his shoulders into the sky. **“You're not even listening!”**

She turned, sporting a friendly wink as she sprinted forward. **“I'll avenge your death!”** she called back, distance swiftly coming between them. The rumbling all but quieted, the air chilled he was drenched in shadow. Stomach contending with his heart to jump out his throat, sounds of thick liquid hit grass, warm breath covered his back, his blue eyes hesitantly peered around the edge of his hood.

The sun heightened the intensity, the darkness this monstrous boar cast larger than any merchant's cart. Bone torn through skin across its back, a bright purple gemstone littered across its body, all culminating to its eyes of a similar material. The boy flinched, his foot slid back, the boar's tusks now overhead. A strong urge of danger washed over him.

CRASH!

Chunks of dirt flew in all directions, the tusk buried mere inches from its target. The boy's body shaking while the boar pulled itself free. He clenched a fist, an attempt to quell the panic, that steam returned, chest tight, frustration building.

I can do this. I can't keep running.

He inhaled, long, deep, feet unwilling to move, he forced one to slide back regardless. His weight pulled forward. *You've got this.* His mind raced, the beast's gaze staring him down. The hair on the back of his neck stood on end. Backing down was no longer an option. His trembling hands tensed; a hint of blue scattered across the palms. With one short breath, he lowered himself further, his weight shifting entirely

as he launched himself upward, that same blue distributed from hand to boot. Jump heightened as he stared this monster down from up high. His palms ripped apart, the glow between them swirling into a long pole-like shape, gripped in both hands. Large curved blades peaked at both edges; his grip tightened as gravity pulled him back toward the earth. He fell toward his target, arms pulling back in a wide arc, waiting for that perfect moment.

He swung, the blue erupted into a mist, completely engulfing himself and his target. He'd felt resistance, he hit it. He definitely hit it. As his feet touched the ground a smile glinted under his hood, sheer joy while the mist slowly faded.

"I-I did it. I actually did it" He gleamed, jumping lightly in excitement. His eye opened, it settled on the large shape in front, a grumble rumbled stridently, shaking the dirt as the boar stood unphased. His heart sank, arms falling to his side. **"Oh shi-** "his words cut off, body thrust skyward by large tusks, his scream returned in scale as he tumbled down. Arms outstretched preparing for impact, a surge of relief shot through him as something soft cushioned his fall. The boar squealed, heaving forward, the boy felt himself moving, hands gripping fistfuls of fur as this creature took off at full speed.

"KIMIKO!!"

A distance from the chaos ran the woman from earlier, her steps loose, unbothered by danger. Her thick blue ponytail trailed behind her, matching a long slender tail of the same colour. She wore a bright yellow sleeveless turtleneck, a skirt split to the thigh with black shorts, matching boots sat high above the knee. Despite the circumstance she seemed calm, glancing over her shoulder at the boy's predicament. **"What? -"** her voice trickled off to a snicker, forcing herself not to erupt into laughter. **"Well. Look at you"** she sneered.

"Don't just stand there! HELP ME!"

A panicked response made her cat-like ear twitch. A finger raised to her lip, eyes shifting skyward as if she was giving it a sincere consideration. **"Hmm. But if I do that, you won't learn anything."** She threw her palms up, turning her back to him. Their distance easily maintained.

"THIS SITUATION IS YOUR FAULT!"

She tensed at the accusation, a sense of guilt striking her for the first time. **"I guess you have a point there..."** she hesitated. Arms raised, lip curled, eyes rolled. With a loud sigh, she relented. **"Fine. I'll fix it."** She let her foot slide across the dirt, her movement slowing considerably, she used the momentum to spin herself around, tugging a blade from its sheath attached to her boot. She twirled it around her fingers before settling it in her palm. Legs bent; body nimble as she waited for this boar to get closer.

"What're you doing!?" his voice shrieked again, she ignored him, a smile creeping across her face as her target ran ever nearer.

"Keep your head down! I don't want to accidentally hit ya." She gleamed.

"EXCUSE ME!?"

As they stood a hair apart, she took a step to the side, her dagger facing outwards. The creature zoomed past; she stood unmoved. It began to grow sluggish behind her, stopping abruptly it fell to its side. The boy involuntarily launched from its back, hitting the grass with a thud and a mouth full of mud. He spat haphazardly desperately trying to clear his mouth as she sauntered over to him, flicking her blade and placing it back in its sheath. **"There you go. Happy now?"**

The boy turned in her direction, his eyes hidden by the shadow of the hood, but his glare volatile, the vitriol coming off him like poison while he wiped himself off. She braced herself for the usual onslaught that was his complaints. **"Why the hell did you piss it off so early in the morning? I almost got my ass handed to me by that thing!"**

Her eyes rolled; **"It's a mana boar and it's not like you'd have died or anything. Though... I guess if you did, I'd have to find a new toy- I mean. Companion"**. She peeked over, his body shaking while he grumbled under his breath. His annoyance was always a joy to her, he was generally so calm and composed but more recently he was so short with all her antics.

"I'm done with helping you! You're on your own, I've had enough. Between this and the incident last week. I'm safer on my own." He brushed the last of the dirt from his face, stomping toward the silhouette of a town in the distance.

The girl leaned her weight on one leg, arms folded. **"Okay bye! I'm sure you have money, right?"** she teased. Her grin only grew wider as Ethan stopped, he turned in her direction, fist tight as he swung his arm.

"NO! Neither of us have anything now, because you got it trampled!"

"It wasn't my fault you couldn't hold onto it-"

"Can you stop blaming me for everything!" His words cut her this time, that same guilty feeling nagging the corner of her mind as a twinge of pain sprinkled in his tone.

She raised a hand, a sign of surrender. **"Okay okay, I admit that one was probably not fair."**

"Thank you." He shook his head, the tension slowly fading, he paced a little on his feet. **"Can't you just... you know. Not. Get into trouble where we're going?"** his shoulders slumped as his voice trailed off. **"I don't want to mess this up. We might only have one chance here."**

"Fine, I'll be on my best behaviour, okay? Promise". A brief smile confirmed their continued alliance.

Ethan seemed content enough, however as they both turned to look at the mountainous ball of fur and bone beside them, they found themselves with another problem. **"So... what are we going to do with this?"** he asked. Kimiko pursed a finger to her lips, the ring etched in the hem of the glove glinting in the sunlight as she grinned smugly.

The sun hung a little higher in the sky, the once calm air now filled with the hustle and bustle of locals that wandered the streets the two now found themselves in. Trickle of water lined the edge of the road, curved around the cobblestone path in a steady stream. It all led to a flourishing green tree towering over all in the centre of town. Houses built in both stone and wood, baskets crafted from flax and dried grass filled to the brim with flowers of varying colour. Stalls littered the sides of the street with coloured cloth overflowing the senses. Banners hung from house to house covering the streets in pink, yellow, and blue. Flyers scattered across the path, more stuck to the glass on store windows, a variation of present events and a stern warning.

No magic

Ethan tugged his hood, a lump forming in his throat, meanwhile his companion openly wandered the streets. A grey hat loosely covered her ears. A pouch bouncing in her hand as she glanced back at him. A smug smile he'd come to loathe. **"I'm so glad we found that thing this morning"** she boasted, waving the pouch in his face. **"See, totally wasn't a waste of time"**.

"Just because we could sell it, doesn't justify the fact that you were bored when you pissed it off." He scowled. Her relaxed nature put him more at ease, though he knew better than to completely trust her judgement in a place like this. He flinched as someone looked in his direction, only to be lightly hit in his shoulder.

“Just consider it part of your training. Probably.” Her words cut through his anxieties, instead playing on his prior annoyance.

“Uh huh. Sure. You need to stop using that as an excuse. I can’t learn anything, if I’m dead!”

“By the way, you missed that shot earlier.” She started, her head lightly shaking, voice littered with a disappointment that echoed his own thoughts. **“You would’ve had him too, your strike was way too large though, what a waste of energy.”**

“Gah, yeah I know... my timing was off.” He mimicked her movements, annoyed with himself as his steps began to slow. His gaze lowered while the prior events rang through his mind in quick succession. **“If I’d just solidified it one second later.”** His eyes shifted from the floor to her form, still walking, his scowl returned. **“Hey! Don’t change the subject!”** he swiftly caught back up, her foot swerving so they were facing each other, her pace remained the same as before. She held both hands behind her back, fingers interlaced while she grinned at him, her skill evident as she avoided collision while she wandered backwards.

“You’re so uptight. Relaaaaax. Enjoy life.” She reached out a hand, bopping his nose with her finger before spinning back on her heel to walk forward, her ponytail hitting him in the face.

“You’re the reason I can’t relax” he grumbled.

As they came into the centre square the roots of the tree became more apparent, the structures shaped around them with clear intent, the tree itself was lined with thousands of hanging flags. From a distance they took the shape of wings on parts of the tree. Settled around the open area sat a mountainous fountain, various seats curved around lush greenery, a minor forest scattered in pieces around the cobble paths, a canopy of leaves. Among them were more stalls, this time filled with smells that could make your mouth water. Masks and accessories lined shelves on these makeshift shops, all selling various decorations for an upcoming event. The base of the tree was clear, a big empty space that seemed to be a culmination of what everyone was setting up for.

“What’s going on here?” He asked bewildered.

“Hmm. Seems like some kinda festival” she glanced at some nearby sweet buns grilling a short distance from them. They were shaped like flowers, similar to the ones on the top of the tree in town.

“Festival?” Ethan asked.

She looked at him with an eyebrow cocked. **“Like a big celebration? What you never heard of one?”** she snickered.

His cheeks flushed as he looked at the floor. **“I think I’ve heard about it... In a book once.”** His voice trailed off as he began playing with his fingers, avoiding her gaze like a child. His line of sight now limited by the wares he’d only glimpsed at prior, small figurines shaped as a person with four fairy-like wings, carved from a wood not unlike the great tree. The words Nova Festival carefully etched into the base with a beautiful curve in its lettering. Small gemstones crafted to look like flowers settled next to it, beautifully decorated hair pins, and brooches. The masks hanging to their left looked to be carved from wood, painted leaves caressing its sides all the way to an open smiling mouth.

A sudden jolt snaps him back as he is pushed forward, his reaction enough to keep himself standing **“Watch yourself kid.”** A grumpy voice drowned out among all the others, Ethan straightened, trying to take up as little space as possible, Kimiko pulled up next to him. **“I hope we can still find a room.”** He said nervously, the sudden realisation of the crowd starting to sink in.

She waved a small hand, her stance widened as she took up the space of two people. **“Well, either way, we ain’t paying.”** She sneered, jiggling the man’s coin purse in her hand.

Ethan stood in a well kept lobby. Large carved wooden pillars at each edge. People chatter while huddled in its corners, coming and going from the entrance as they excitedly run toward the festivities. He stands alone, a clear misfit as the woman at the desk before him trails their finger through a massive book. It slides all the way down before turning another page. Her loose ponytail gently sitting on her shoulder as she leaned forward. Time dragging as she trailed it across the page one line at a time. She stopped. A quick glance back up to him. **"All full up sorry."** Her voice was more lacklustre than he'd have liked. **"Thank you."** He lightly bowed his head, a sign of respect as he turned to leave.

Kimiko leaned against the exterior of the building. Arms folded as she stared long and hard at the flocks of people. She barely noticed as Ethan returned to her side, her focus clearly elsewhere, he knew the true intent of that stare, no doubt she only saw people's valuables instead of the people themselves. **"All gone huh?"** she said quietly, catching his dreary mood. She pushed herself from the wall, loosely hitting his shoulder in a playful manner. **"This ain't the only inn, we still got a chance."** She smiled, taking a few steps back toward the crowds. Ethan followed her lead, his expression lightening.

"Y-yeah. You're right."

The sun reached its peak in the sky, Kimiko stared down at her companion, their hands and knees settled firmly on cobblestone, head hung low as their brown hair swung further than the fabric of their hood. **"I didn't think you'd get so upset about this."** She stated bending down so their faces weren't too far apart.

"I just wanted a nice comfy bed." He whined, his head sinking further. His distress was more than she desired, she stood herself straight, a hand on her hip, eyebrow raised. She pondered their predicament for a moment, settling on her next move after moments of silence. She spun around, dropping all her body weight on top of his back, a comfortable sitting position. He immediately tensed, glaring at her while she looked toward the cloudless sky. **"Get off."**

"Mm, I would but then it'd just be a waste of a seat." She elevated one leg over the other, placing her elbow on his head. His arms shook while he grumbled under his breath. **"You get upset too fast. Didn't we come here for something else? Look at this place, it's...stupidly busy. One of these people has bound to be him, right? And even if we don't find him here, we have a festival we can enjoy."**

The shaking stopped, Ethan lifted his head an inch, his eyes grazing the crowds not far from them. She was right. He bent both arms, allowing both of them to fall as he began pulling himself out from under her. **"Ow. Could've warned me"** she rubbed her lower back, butt flat on the stone floor.

"If I did, you'd have made it harder to get up." He brushed himself off. His cloak still particularly dirty after the earlier events. The tear now evident.

"True." As Ethan's hand extended down, she grabbed hold of it, pulling with force in an attempt to yank him back down. His front foot slid slightly, but held firm, hauling her to her feet while remaining upright. **"You're finally learning"** she snickered.

"Unfortunately."

"Let's go check out those food stalls over there, I'm sure I can smell something sweet" Kimiko returned both hands behind her head, leaning backwards a fraction while walking forward. Ethan adjusted his hood, making certain his face was covered, he felt less out of place as other cloaked figures walked the streets. As he took a step forward, a light tug caught him off guard.

"I'm sorry". The grip released, allowing him to glance behind him. Standing there was a middle-aged woman, dark black hair cut to her shoulders, a humble tan dress with a brown capelet, she looked worn from the day's events, shifting on her feet. Her fingers fidgeted as if a little unnerved. Her nails painted a vibrant pink that seemed out of place.

“I couldn’t help but overhear that you were looking for a room”

“Ah, yeah.” He started, forcing a smile to cut through the tension. **“It seems like we came a little too late”** he nervously chuckled. Kimiko had returned to his side, she stood almost between them, her form tall. Yellow eyes staring down the woman in an intimidating manner.

The woman shrunk her frame a smidge, returning her gaze to Ethan, her eyes shifting once in a while to his companion as if to keep tabs on what she was doing. **“I happen to have a room available!”** she blurted out. A forced smile that was so uncomfortable, the edges of her mouth twitched. **“It’s just down the street from here.”**

Ethan’s eyes widened. **“Seriously!? What luck!”** He turned to his companion, now smiling the same as she always had. **“What do you think Kimiko?”** he asked, almost sparkling from the excitement, the first good thing to happen today had changed the whole air around him. She folded her arms, leaning to one side as one leg took all her weight. Her eyes scanned the woman, it trailed to the only possible direction they’d likely be travelling in. She unfurled her arms and reassuringly tapped Ethan’s back.

“Might as well have a look”

“Here we are.” The woman raised taller than before, hands on hips with a little more confidence in her step, standing before all three was a building in desperate need of repair, only serving its basic purpose. Its walls were wooden, immense beams on either side of the house holding everything in place, cracks running through various parts of the wood, with an audible strain. The windows were small, only one door led in or out from the street, it stood in good company as the neighbouring structures sat in similar quality. Kimiko’s smile gone, replaced by a grimace. Meanwhile Ethan was gleaming, he turned to Kimiko, his eyes lit from beneath the hood, a vibrant blue, seemingly glowing underneath the shadow that covered his face. While he looked in her direction, she forced a smile.

The inside was not much better, it was vaguely clean, dust layered the shelves, only parts of the floor had clear signs of upkeep. Everything was crafted from wood with stone floors holding it all up. A stale musk reigned over all other scents. There was not much furniture, even less in comforts. They were led to a set of stairs, steep, a width barely able to hold one foot firmly. They creaked an unearthly groan with even a minor pressure.

At the top of the stairs was their room, narrow with one tiny window at its edge, two beds facing the wall a small width apart. There was no room between the bedpost and wall, leaving one to crawl across the other in order to leave the room. With the accommodation now in view, Kimiko stared at Ethan who had scrambled over toward the window, taking in the breeze.

“You okay with this place?” she asked, a shred of hope that he’d refuse. He nodded, his cloak rustling from the profuse movement. **“I guess we’ll take it then”** she shrugged.

The woman however could not hide her excitement. **“Ah! That is fantastic!”** she clapped her hands together. **“Feel free to leave anything in your room when you go out to explore. I have a key you can use.”**

She rifled through her pockets, holding an iron key. Weighty as Kimiko tentatively lifted it from her palm. **“Thanks a bunch”** Ethan smiled at her, his body falling on the bed closest to the window.

Kimiko took a second to notice the woman’s hand, palm still open as she outwardly waited for payment. Hesitantly Kimiko dropped two coins. That was all it took for her to begin leaving the room. **“With that, I’ll leave you two be. If you need anything, you just let me know!”** she waved.

“Will do!” Ethan responded as she pulled the door shut. Kimiko stared her down, her hat twitching as she listened to the wood straining under her weight. Once she knew the woman had descended the stairs, she took her own seat on the empty bed beside her.

“Ahhh.... This is the best” Ethan sunk into the blanket, his arms cuddling the pillow, face buried.

“I mean...we have a bed now, I guess. Now what?” she asked while laying back.

Ethan popped his head back up, the hood askew, revealing a short brown hair strand settled in the centre of his face, a thin scar graced his left cheek. **“Hmm. I guess I’ll have a look around before it gets dark. We need supplies”**. He slowly pushed the pillow away, dragging himself backwards into a sitting position.

“Cool. I’m gonna crash here, I woke up way too early this morning”

“You slept in longer than I did, then pissed off that mana boar.” Ethan retorted while climbing across her bed, the current obstacle between him and the door.

“Yeah, boy that was exhausting.” His knee collided with her leg. **“OW. Hey!”**

He scrambled off the bed, barely missing a swing of her arm. Straightening himself back out, he opened the door while grinning at her from an arm’s breadth, in his hand was the coin pouch she’d stolen earlier. **“I’ll be back soon.”** He chuckled, the door closing behind him.

“WHATEVER! Knock yourself out! OH, AND BRING ME ONE OF THOSE SWEET THINGS!” her voice echoed through the stairwell as he began descending down.

While the street felt eerily quiet, an intense gaze weighed on Ethan’s back. The realisation he was now on his own heightened that intensity, producing an anxiety he was all too familiar with. He swiftly headed back in the direction of the main road, tugging at the fabric around his shoulders, covering more of himself in an attempt to lose some of that attention. Multiple sets of eyes followed his form as he walked. The moment the street grew noisy, a fragment of that anxiety began to dull. He reached at his waist for a familiar paper, instead met by disappointment. *Right, it got trampled.* No paper, charcoal, or anything else he could write on he began using his fingers.

“Hm, Food. Clothes, rope.... A new bag. Where am I supposed to find a new bag? I don’t even have my old blueprint. Ugh. This is going to take all day.” His shoulders slumped, the coin pouch jingling in his hand as he carefully hung it from one of the notches on his belt. His steps grew heavy from the sombre mood, the clink of the buckles more obvious. Various people wandered past him, running from stall to stall as more places had set up. A glorious variety of scents that could make the mouth water amassed nearby. His curiosity dragged his attention everywhere except forward, briefly scanning the people who lingered around him. Kids, adventurers, merchants, couples seemingly enjoying each other’s company. His eye twitched, the frustration returning as the situation gripped him. **“Grr, doesn’t she think before she does something!?”** his thoughts came out louder than anticipated, a few passersby stopped and stared in his direction. His face began heating rapidly, a flicker of blue spurred from his shoulders, vanishing as fast as it appeared. He took his leave, rushing toward a quieter spot in the town centre. *She’s so annoying. Even when she’s not here she’s causing me problems.* He stopped beside the giant tree, a hand grazing the thick coarse bark that covered it. Small parts had nearly worn away from frequent touch.

He turned around, leaning all its weight against its sturdy frame, head tilting just enough so he could see without his hood falling backward. Eyes observing both cloth and sky in equal amounts, the sun covered densely by the overhanging leaves.

Why does she even keep me around? She’s stronger than me. I can’t even hit my target. His hands folded across his chest, arms tucked in tight, he lowered his head, eyes closed. *She probably just keeps me around to throw at her problems. She’d have died if she wasn’t so fast...and strong and...*

“UGH, that makes it even worse. It’s one thing to be an ass, but it’s another to be a skilled ass” he grumbled, his upper body scrunching as if to contain another outburst. *She says I’m a toy, but she can’t actually think that right?*

CRASH!

A loud thud snapped him back to the present. An elderly man fumbled about as they struggled to pick one up the few crates they’d knocked over. Ethan tore himself from the tree. **“I got it”** he waved a hand, briskly running over. Carefully he picked them up, stacking them in smaller groups. He pushed them off the path. The man took a step back, his thin legs wobbling. Both hands tightly gripped a large branch-like walking stick like it was the only thing holding him upright. His back hunched, covered by a cloak of moss and leaves. A small duck perched on his back. It took Ethan aback as he got a proper look at him, his skin was rough, like wood. His beard twisted, clumped together like the roots of a tree. The wrinkles told a story of their own as gravity provided him a sad expression. The man nodded politely, he raised a hand, folding his fingers twice in an attempt to draw Ethan nearer.

Ethan obliged, the reward of a very quiet *thank you* gracing his ears in a type of whistle, as though someone whispered through leaves. **“It was no problem.”** Ethan responded, a little confused, he found himself almost entranced until another sweet scent struck his nose. *Bring me one of those sweet things!* The annoyance of her voice reminding him of his tasks. He gave a smile, though he knew it was hidden, politely he returned the minor nod. *The town is filled with such interesting people.* He sauntered off, not yet to notice someone else stalwartly watching him from a short distance away.

As the sky began to dim, stores displayed their lanterns, fire crystals encased in glass, various glowing flowers in beautiful terrariums, small fire flies gathered on string lights lit up the many nooks and crannies of the streets. The colours changed from building to building as few light sources were the same. This place embraced a lot of the natural lights from the surrounding forest, they shimmered against the glass along with the bright pinks and yellows of the sky, creating a stunning view. The streets now empty as people had begun closing up for the evening.

A patched leather bag hung at his waist, filled to the brim in a way that pulled at its seams. The metal latch barely kept its contents from spilling out. Around his chest was a leather satchel, smaller than the other. Both hands held paper shopping bags.

“That’s everything I think.” He mumbled tiredly; his feet shuffled along the cobblestone. Each step haphazard as he released a sigh, all that remained was to find his way back to their room, he had kept a rough mental note, but the maze-like streets made it hard to find anything. So long as he made his way back to the tree in its centre, he was fine. He smiled, a comfort that a soft bed was waiting for him. No more sleeping on the hard cold ground. *I can’t wait.* He wandered past a group of three, exhaustion taking the majority of his attention, faintly he could make out some kind of conversation in the otherwise quiet street.

“C’mom, you did promise you’d make it up to me.” A male voice gleamed, **“He’s right. I heard it myself”** Another followed. Ethan found himself stopping as he heard a woman’s voice. **“I already apologised. I’m not going to do what you want.”** Her voice was timid yet oddly firm. As he took a glance their way, a cascade of pink hair stole his gaze, tied loosely at the bottom. Skin pale, without blemish. He couldn’t help himself as his eyes followed her slender curves, her clothing tight, waist exposed, legs covered in black with small tears across the leggings. His eyes met hers, they were also pink, seemingly glowing in the dull light.

He felt his body tense; a strange sensation filled his mind; it was her voice pleading with him to help her. He pulled a foot forward, shifting one bag to his other hand, leaving one free. The first of the men grabbed

her arm tight, her timid act dropping **"Release me."** She snarled. Every attempt to pull her hand free resulted in a tighter grip. Ethan narrowed the distance between them. His fingers sparked.

Without warning the man's hand erupted in blue flame.

He released the girl, screaming loudly as he flailed his hand about. The other distraught over what to do. While distracted Ethan lightly grasped the girl's hand, tugging her his way. **"Sorry!"** he called back, hauling the girl alongside him as he took off down the street. The flame vanished without so much of a trace.

"What are you doing!?" she squealed, following along as she was given little choice. **"They're getting away!"** the other man's voice trailed behind as Ethan rounded a corner.

"Sorry, I'll let go in a minute I swear." As they ran through an alleyway, Ethan spotted a lower roof, his fingertips shimmered blue, the bottom of his feet doing the same. He let go of her hand, leaping about half way, his foot hovered midair as he jumped again. The woman stood in shock, staring in awe as his feet seemingly jumped on nothing. He landed on the rooftop, dropping his bags. He spun himself around, his arm hanging while the other gripped the edge for balance.

"You're crazy" she stammered out, hesitatingly walking past him but as a noise came from behind, she instinctively grabbed his hand. He heaved her onto the roof, both of them lying flat as the two ran below them, never stopping before disappearing through another side street. Ethan watched from his perch; his shoulders slowly relaxing once the danger subsided. **"You going to let go?"** her voice destroyed his newfound relaxation, hand still clinging to hers.

"AH! I'm so sorry!" he released it swiftly, his arms waving frantically in front of him. **"I didn't mean to drag you, I just know I couldn't fight them but I wanted to help and it seemed like a smart idea but I guess it was probably a bit dumb-."**

A finger pressed firmly against his lips. **"Heh, such a doll. It's okay. I appreciate your help, even if I didn't ask for it."** As she took her finger away, she leaned forward, Ethan shifted back, his cheeks burning, presently doing everything in his power to avoid her gaze. **"Am I not allowed to see the face of my hero?"** she asked, her face inches from his. He moved further back, his hands creating a weak boundary between the two.

"I-I have to keep it on"

As he continued to fidget, she cocked her head to the side. **"I won't say anything. Don't worry."** She reassured him.

The two sat apart from each other, the woman trying to catch his gaze but he continued to evade her at every turn. His face so red it was almost glowing. **"Um. Can you get back to the main street on your own?"** he tried to break the silence, while keeping some level of distance between them.

She rolled her eyes, hesitantly pulling herself back onto her feet, her body flinched the moment she put pressure on her right foot. **"Ugh... my ankle. I must have twisted it"**.

"AH! I'm so sorry!" Ethan went into a panic, he stood straight, immediately positioning himself at her side so she could lean against him. **"I'll help you get back."**

"No arguments here."

Ethan found himself carrying all his belongings alongside piggy backing the young woman from earlier, the streets were now dark, lit only by whatever lights the stores had in their windows in addition to the few street lights that hung up high between buildings. She noticed the build on his arms, they were lacking in mass but firm, he could clearly handle this, though the extra weight seemed to cause him some difficulty.

His pace had slowed, a source of amusement at his struggles. **“So, you rescue all the damsels in distress around here?”** she asked, her arms wrapped tenderly around his shoulders. She eyed his hood as her fingers caressed the edges of it.

“Oh, uh no. I don’t really do stuff like this.” He stammered back; his voice strained with each wobbled step.

“Oh, lucky me.” She leered, pulling one arm upwards, she leaned in closer, her fingers curling around the bottom of his hood, she tugged it to one side exposing his cheek. **“Here is fine doll.”** she whispered. Ethan recoiled, the stumble nearly causing both of them to fall.

As he regained his composure, they stopped at a nearby bench. Prudently he lowered her back down, his hood still where it should be, much to his relief. **“Sorry again about your ankle”** he raised an arm, his hand loosely scratching the back of his head, body tilted forward to make himself smaller.

“Eh, it doesn’t even hurt anymore. Don’t worry about it.” She brushed a hand through her hair, returning a few strands to the mass, one stray looped around her finger as she smiled. Her eyelids partially closed, showcasing the lush pink eyeshadow he hadn’t noticed prior. A mole under her left eye, lips red as a rose. **“Are you here tomorrow? You’ll have to let me thank you.”**

“Y-yeah. I’m here for a few days.”

“Fantastic!” Her hands clapped together. **“I’m performing tomorrow.”** she pointed toward a stage that was still under construction near the base of the tree. She leaned a little closer. **“Come see me before then. I’d love to show you a little something.”** As his eyes met hers, his thoughts began to dim, mind hazing over, he stood in silence, all he could see was those eyes, everything else had faded away. His bags fell to his feet, mouth partially agape. She stood, stance unphased as she blew him a kiss. **“Looks like someone is here to pick me up. Later gorgeous”** she waved her fingers in his direction, her hips twisting as she walked toward a large silhouette, obscured by the dim lighting. Various bright colours scattered across thick muscle. Ethan could barely stand as the two took their leave, only once she was out of sight, he returned to his senses.

“Huh?” he shook his head, a strange sensation clouding his thoughts. He had to catch himself as his body swayed, his mind struggling to piece things together until a familiar smell from earlier that day wafted over. **“OH! The sweet buns, ah I forgot”** he scooped up his bags, running to the stall before they closed up for the night.

With all his tasks finally done, he headed back, throwing the door to their room open to find –

Nothing.

“Gods damn it. Kimiko, where’d you go?”

Across the city, among the various stone and wood, cramped between two larger structures, lay a mass of rubble disguised as a building. Vines crept along the wooden supports, finding no bias from wood to stone as it covered most of the lower left wall. Windows filled with a yellow tinted glinting in the dark, accompanied by a hanging lantern with a simple flame burning within. The door loosely swung in the wind as someone had forgotten to close it, the noise from inside inviting any passersby in who dared to enter.

The inside was remarkably better than the exterior, the floor lined with wooden boards, a shift in tone by the various rugs that decorated its surface. A warm yellow dominated the walls, bleeding onto the hanging banners. The odd trophy hanging from a wooden mantle, adventurers' names plastered across it in a proud manner. The bar was polished without flaw, the surrounding floor not kept to the same standard, notches carved into the wood caused by a drunken fight or two.

Tables littered the space, each housing four to five chairs, booths nestled in the corners trailing along the back wall with similarly wooden seats. Many empty, but the noise lingered. Surrounding one table in the centre were more patrons than seats, a chant consuming the rest of the tavern.

Chug! Chug! Chug!

Two sat at the table, tankard in hand, heads back, drink struggling not to dribble down the sides of their mouth. One slammed the table with a now empty cup, smirk beaming as her hair partially covered her eyes. The challenger followed suit, swaying in their chair as they similarly placed down their drink with a heavy hand. The crowd erupted in cheer; two more drinks slid across the table.

Kimiko sat smugly, her arm leaning against the back of the chair, the other firmly holding the refill. Her opponent did not seem as enthusiastic. This poor slim chap barely able to sit straight, they stared down their drink, the sight of another caused him to lurch, hand swiftly gripping his mouth, he darted from the chair toward any source of relief. **"Another win for me~"** she hummed, waving her mug in front of the others. **"Who's next?"**

"Ya gotta stop sometime." A man scoffed, his blonde hair slicked to the side, a well-built upper body, he sat down while dressed in leather and high-quality cotton, a crest of some kind sewn into his front pocket, his beard trimmed neatly, a similar length to the sides of his hair. He threw a few coins onto the table. **"Might as well try my luck."** He raised a hand, signalling the bartender. **"Another round!"** he called through the crowd, their response a quick nod as the sound of pouring beer was drowned out by the mass of figures talking among themselves.

The two seated clinked their mugs, a quick nod in approval as they began to down it. The base of the mug climbed ever higher as it grew more and more empty. **"YOU WERE HERE!"** an angry voice bellowed, Kimiko's drink flew across the table, eyes wide, hair standing on end as she ceased movement. She quietly sunk into her chair, gravity in full use as she ended up under the table. Her hand briefly popped back up to grab her winnings. The challenger, along with the audience, stared in confusion as events halted abruptly.

They parted enough for Ethan to stomp his way to the table, snickers and chuckles resonating through the crowd as a few returned to their tables, the challenger stayed seated, a smug grin on his face at the sudden chaos. Despite everyone moving seats, attention remained on the two. A hand slammed against the table, Kimiko recoiled shrinking further, her eyes shut in the process. Ethan propped himself down to the same level, the shadow of the table creating a near ominous look as his entire face was black as night. **"If I can't see you, you aren't there"** her voice cracked.

"So, this is your BEST behaviour huh?" he growled.

"Dang, didn't work." She grumbled. Her head rolled, eyes opening in his direction, her hand gripping his shoulder as she used him to pull herself to her knees. **"Don't be so moody. You took our cash so I was just making some more. It's fine."** She tried to wave him off, only for him to grab her arm, helping her out from under the table and onto her feet. Her lack of balance becoming particularly evident.

"You promised to be on your best behaviour. How much did you drink?"

Kimiko glanced upwards, the gears turning in her mind as she pondered the question. Her hands raised, fingers going up and down periodically, it took moments to settle on seven pointing upwards. **"This many. No... wait. OHHH that was just with the last guyy"** she chuckled between words, dropping most of her weight against her companion.

Ethan let out a sigh filled with exhaustion and annoyance. A few nearby still chortling at the two's interaction. With their acknowledgement of the present situation Ethan forced Kimiko to bow her head with him. **"I'm sorry about my companion's behaviour"**. His voice sincere, while Kimiko giggled, her mouth began making strange unladylike sounds.

The challenger, still seated, raised his hand in a friendly manner. **"It ain't no problem, mate."** His accent was thick, one Ethan had not heard before despite their travels this past year.

"You're such a joy-killer" Kimiko piped up." **Chillax mom. Gods, you're so uptight. Remember, we went over this, you gotta enjoy liiliife.**" She poked his nose with her finger, grinning from ear to ear. Her breath stinking of strangely sweet beer. Alcohol radiating from her every movement as the lingering effects seemed to be dictating her mindset.

"Come on, we're going back." He had to use both arms to keep her elevated at this point, her own will to stay standing waning. **"Sorry again"**

"Why? We were having fun. I want to play some more" She whined, throwing herself backwards, almost falling over.

Ethan frantically tried his best to keep her stable. Making her take even a step was becoming more difficult as she was now acting like a toddler. **"You can barely stand."** He retorted. A small part of him willing to leave her behind and go back on his own.

With the two doing their own thing, the challenger began to laugh again. His hand lightly hitting the table at their antics, a quick flash of pink nail polish grazing the wood." **You two sure have a great dynamic, why don't ya join us for one drink eh lad?"**

"Yeah, come on, one more?" Kimiko asked, her face now resting against his hood, requiring him to push her away, a tentative balance to keep her standing. It was with this question that he noticed the tavern was busier than before. A face he'd seen earlier stood close to the door; the once seated crowd was no longer at their tables.

"Um. S-sorry. We still have things to do. Maybe another time." He moved to leave, a few more from the prior group barricading in his path.

"Look, more guys joined the parrty!" Kimiko threw an arm in the air. A few of the others joined in her cheers. It made Ethan uncomfortable; this wasn't in jest, the usual tavern atmosphere was jovial, many talking among themselves, however here the only conversation going on at present was at this table. The challenger once again piped back up. **"What's the rush kid?"** he began shifting from the seat, resulting in Ethan stepping backwards. **"You two should stick around."** He grinned, his hand resting firmly on Ethan's other shoulder.

"...We really can't" Ethan murmured, taking another step back.

The man's face darkened, he raised his head sharply, a swift nod to a few behind them. Two men cut off the supplementary exit. **"That's a damned shame."** he continued. **"You don't got much of a choice mate."** As he spoke Kimiko slumped against Ethan. Her body falling limp, her breathing steadied.

"Kimiko? No, no no. Don't fall asleep!" it took the majority of his strength to keep her upright now that she was no longer taking any of her own weight.

"So comfy" she mumbled.

He shook her shoulders. **"Wake up!"** He growled. Her slow relaxed breaths continued, the odd snore mixed in as her head fell forward. The stranger rifled through his pocket, his hand raised with a clink as he showcased an empty potion bottle, the tag still attached.

A sleeping pot.

"She might've had a bit too much to drink. Neko-folk sure do love their liquor" he smirked. Ethan's eyes grew wide, how did they know? Her hat was still on her head, though jostled about her ears were still hidden. A flick from the corner of his eye caused his heart to sink, her tail swaying about. *She didn't hide it!? Was she walking around with her tail out and about the entire time?* His body began to boil, fury

now battling the fear of the situation they were now in. He couldn't take all of these people on his own. Even with Kimiko at her best he wasn't sure leaving was doable. *What do I do?* His eyes darted around the tavern, thoughts running rampant as he tried to calculate some path that would be the least resistance. His own breath quickened, he failed to notice the man in front take a step closer, his form towering over Ethans.

"Now take a seat." A foot collided with Ethan's chest, the grip on Kimiko released, he tumbled backwards smashing into one of the nearby tables. His back slamming hard against the wood as it followed suit. He lurched forward, knees hitting the hardwood floor. The air pulled from his lungs as pain took hold. He coughed, his lungs burning as he gasped for breath. Fingers gripping at his chest while the other held him upright.

"Easiest catch we've had in a while." The man knelt down, his leather coat stretching as he grabbed hold of Kimiko. Hauling her up by the arm, her hat on the floor, she hung there still sleeping soundly. **"How long is the boss gonna be?"** his voice carried through the room.

"Another hour or two, they're prepping for tomorrow"

"Ugh. Well, can't do much." He tossed the girl to a person behind him. **"Someone check the kid. Make sure he ain't got nothin."** He ordered.

"Yeah yeah, I got it." A shorter man dressed in more high-quality cotton wandered over to Ethan. His fingers covered in rings, shoes shined, hair in a short ponytail, his hand stretched out to remove the boy's hood, the expectation disappointed him as his hand moved through empty air. Ethan's head sat to the side, the annoyed grunt signalling the man's second attempt. Ethan shifted his head again, listening for the frustration. As they came close enough, he thrust himself forward. Skull colliding with the man's nose. He hurled backwards, foot stumbling as Ethan shot up from his position. He skirted the man who kicked him and reached for Kimiko, his fingers grazing her arm before a hand wrapped around his throat. His legs dangling from the ground as he was lifted, vision set to his companion as his fingers desperately clawed at the man's hand.

"A bit too eager ain't ya kid." The disdain was venomous, the grip fastening, Ethan's legs began to kick frantically, the panic all-consuming as he struggled to budge. His vision blurred, strength waning with each passing moment, finally the grip subsided. The world spun, nothing coherent until the wall collided with his back and shoulders, his body falling to the floor, limp. A headache brewing as he lay on the floor. **"I don't take no pride in hurtin kids. But when ya don't listen to ya elders, then ya get punished. Stay put, she's the enemy anyway. You're better off."**

He was right, in some ways he would be better off.

"She...has her quirks" his voice strained, his body screaming at him as he tensed his arms. **"She's horrid. She gets us into trouble."** He forced himself to a kneeling position, a hand firmly against one knee, body shaking. **"She doesn't listen. She's an ass..."** His fingers curled, legs straining as he raised back onto his feet. **"She's. My friend."** He spat, fists clenched, legs bent but holding. **"Let her go!"** he sprang forward, dodging the man's foot as it came his way. He ducked underneath, his speed increasing by sheer adrenaline. He slid around two men, an arm coming close but seemingly hitting a wall that couldn't be seen. As he reached his companion, he seized her arm, dragging her along with him, his leg striking the man holding her to throw off his balance. He could barely think, his body moving on impulse, however with another in his grasp his speed slowed considerably. Two hands tugged at his cloak, throwing him back, Kimiko landing on the floor a distance from him. He hit the ground harshly, a foot colliding with his side. His body curled, breath ragged, the same foot now applying pressure to cease all movement.

The large man leaned himself down, their faces a smidge apart. **"Since ya insist on helpin this lass"** he began to tug at the hood. **"I figure ya got somethin to hide"** with one heavy yank the cloth fell to Ethan's shoulders, revealing short brown hair, lightly tanned skin, a scar on the boy's left cheek, a young face for someone in their late teens. Among the features one would expect was a mound of thick blue

mist that stretched across the boy's face, cloaking his eyes and ears. **"What the hell?"** the man's voice croaked, the pressure subsiding.

Ethan's hand gripped the foot that applied pressure, his fingers burning a bright blue, it darted across the man's shoe, crawling up the man's leg. A thin layer that felt all consuming, covering everything it touched. **"Get. Off me"** A gravel tinged Ethan's voice; the pain being consumed by rage as he began forcing himself upright. He was released without qualms, the few surrounding him backing off as blue seeped across the floor. **"You want to know what I am?"** he mumbled, his posture hunched. The ground behind him began to leak a similar coloured mist, consuming everything in its radius without judgement. Kimiko being the only thing left untouched, those around her began to retreat a step at a time. The mist began to twist, a figure slowly taking shape as bones sprawled across the walls into long fingers. The centre of the mist warping to what looked like ribs. **"They call me, the REAPER"**

The form continued to transform, a skull slinking through the ceiling, eyes glowing intensely at those who remained. Its hands tore from the walls, a long-curved blade being drawn from seemingly nowhere. Standing in the centre of this hulking monstrosity was the boy. Most had abandoned their post, scrambling out the door like scared children. As the creature leaned ever nearer to the few remaining, they too turned and ran, until only one remained. **"You've pissed me off. I don't have a choice anymore."** His tone cold, hand outstretched as the monster copied his movement. **"I'm going to devour your soul."**

The scream that followed was genuine, a shriek filling the empty hall accompanied by loud strides as they fled the scene. The moment the room was silent, the mist began to falter, **"it... it worked"** he huffed, his body aching all over, balance struggling more so as his legs gave out, he fell to his knees. The mist dropping with him, it vanished as fast as it came, a large chunk of it being sucked back into his tired frame. His thoughts jumbled. He tiredly glanced to the spot his friend was in, only to see it empty. His stomach dropped, body no longer responding as he fell to the side. His mind tentatively waited for the hard impact of the floor, instead to be met by something soft.

"AHHH! Look at you! I'm so proud!" The joy radiating from her voice was almost infectious as Ethan haphazardly gave a smile. Her embrace was warm, comforting though the pain lingered. **"You scared the living daylights out of them HA-HA!"** she energetically tussled him about, an unwelcome gesture that he could do nothing. **"I can't believe you used the reaper shtick. That's hilarious. I'm going to devour your souls!"** she teased, her face scrunched.

Ethan lightly pushed away from her. **"Shut up. It was the best I could come up with."** He mumbled. He rested himself up against a nearby table. **"I used too much. I can barely move."**

"I feel like I missed out, I should've beaten them up sooner." She placed both hands on the floor, legs outstretched.

A thought struck him with her present demeanor. **"What about that potion?"** he asked, eyebrow cocked as he began to see a usual pattern emerge.

"What, this?" she held up a full bottle, tag intact the same as the other. **"I swapped em ages ago; they poured a really nice sweetener in my beer."** She grinned; sitting taller, the pride strong. **"I saw them tailing me earlier, it's kind of hilarious how much I fooled the lot of them, I'm such a good actress. I should get paid for this."**

Ethan's head lowered, causing a small amount of concern from his companion. She slowly leaned over to check on him, stopped by a very quiet voice. Her body froze, she began shifting further away from him. **"So.... You were pretending this whole time?"** he asked, the blue raging across his face.

"Uh...It was all part of your training?" she stuttered, her hands raised in a sign of peace.

"TRAINING MY ASS!"

“Wow, what a day! I’m going to go to bed!” Kimiko’s voice echoed through the empty room. She continued to shift backwards until she was out of Ethan’s grasp.

“GRAAHHHH!!”

The tavern windows shone vibrantly, the outside of the tavern lighting up almost like a beacon. Kimiko ran out unphased, a big grin on her face as Ethan tiredly tried to follow after her.

As the cold night breeze rustled the nearby leaves, the boy laid on green grass, covered up in a thick blanket. The leather satchel his pillow, cloak beneath him. The blue remained; it covered his face like a strange mask even while he lay sleeping. Their belongings strewn about their campsite as the flame nearby flickered. Kimiko stood at a distance, campsite still in view. She watched Ethan sleep for a short time before movement caught her full attention. She gave an affirming nod, the figure returning the same. The figure drenched in black held out a small package wrapped in twine. Among the items was a small vial with a pin at its top. She pressed her finger on it, the sharp pain causing a wince, the vial filled with a thick red. As it hit its limit, she threw it back to its owner. With a wave, the figure vanished into the night. Once again, she took her place beside her companion. Lightly tussling his hair, a brief moan coming from him as he rolled over. **“Thanks for today.”** She murmured.

With that, she began going through her package, pocketing a small scroll while her companion snored quietly nearby.

Chapter 2

The morning air was lively, people hurriedly made their way to the countless stalls, each person acquiring the various limited-edition items. Children towed alongside their caretakers, eating food that was freshly baked. Ethan stood in its centre, Kimiko roaming nearby, he took the moment in. His lungs filled with the scent of the forest. The calm was a nice change, his anxieties paling in comparison to the rested atmosphere. Kimiko returned to his side; a bag filled with the sweet buns they had found the day prior. He expected the usual jab as he tried to snatch one. The moment his fingers curled around one, he smirked. It lifted without weight. He turned to gloat his win, but was met by confusion, her mouth was moving. Not just hers, many of the people surrounding them were all talking.

So... Why is it *silent*?

He took a glance at the bun in his hand, the realization deepening, he could smell the forest. *Only* the forest. This bun, his companion, the stalls, they had no smell at all. He opened his own mouth to speak, a lump formed in his throat as nothing escaped. The panic began, his attention on Kimiko, her ears and tail in full view despite being in a human town. He reached for his hood, finding nothing. He took a few steps back, chest pounding but his breath silent. From the corner of his eye, he spotted a flash of pink.

Something within him urged him to follow it. He moved instinctively, the crowd doubling in size as he pushed his way through. As he tried to squeeze past a few more, the crowd thickened further, the mass pulling him backwards, he lost his footing. He fell backwards, the floor disappearing entirely consuming him in a void of black.

The sound of soft weeping washed over the space. It stirs him, a familiar tone he can’t quite remember. Confusion gripped him as with eyes wide, his vision was null. He turned his head, the sensation of

movement the only signifier that he was in fact looking in another direction. He could feel resistance as his foot scuffed along the ground, his stomach sank. No sound followed. He tried to speak again, his throat tensed, the inability to say anything weighing on him immensely. He felt neither hot nor cold, the only sensation available was pressure while he lightly tapped his face with his fingertips.

The weeping grew, located behind him. He turned sharply, struck by a continuous empty plane. This set his anxieties ablaze. Hands flickered in blue, shoulders producing a type of steam while he furiously spun himself around. The sound spurred from all directions. Its weeps now a phrase he could barely make out, the force of it creating a chill down his spine. *Fault*

It took all his effort to make out words. It echoed loudly, he felt something sharp against his cheek. He turned again, the light from his fingers illuminating just him. *It's your fault*

The darkness he stood in began creeping along his shoes, he intensified the glow, an attempt to keep it at bay, it did nothing. The shadow climbed higher; the words so loud he couldn't think.

IT'S YOUR FAULT it chanted. The black void consumed him while he was powerless to stop it. He looked straight ahead; identifying a more tangible source of the sound. *"It's your fault"* the voice was strained, sad, full of a hatred that played on his insecurities. Despite the lack of light, he could see a shape. There was a person there, staring him down with tears staining their face.

The room grew silent. The shape inching closer while Ethan was unable to retreat. His heart threatened to give out from pure fear as this thing stood hulking over him. *"It's. Your. Fault"* the vitriol was unashamed, a hand outstretched as the boy's fear hit its peak. The world sunk into nothing.

His body lurched forward, eyes wide, breath ragged, shoulders seeping blue steam. His heart pounded; hand clutched atop it to keep it contained. Everything shook regardless of will. His free hand scrambling through his pockets, the urgency heightened as he struggled to breathe. A clink cut through the anxieties while his fingers curled around a round metal object. He slipped it onto his index finger, dragging it out in front of him as quickly as he could muster. The moment his eyes caught sight of it, he tore his hand from his chest, lightly gripping the metal with shaky hands. He twisted it

A single metal twang shot forth.

His eyes shut tight; the sound all-consuming as it rang again. With each turn it remained constant, his breath drew in at one, out at the next. The image of a metal finger tapping against wood crept into his mind. Metal contraptions unveiled themselves with each tap, alongside a wooden desk the finger made contact with, it was covered in dents, scrapes, blotches of oil. Another tap, more things came into view, it carried down the sides onto the floor, blueprints, scraps of metal, screws, wires all strewn about the wooden boards. Cushions piled in one corner. He took a deep breath in, the twang had ceased, his mind relaxed as the room was drawn in full. A thick grey beard leaned against the metal; a smile slowly unveiled just before Ethan's eyes opened.

He was met by lush green grass, a thick blanket wrapped around his legs. The sounds of rustling trees, birds chirping merrily, a stream hidden by the thick bush. The sun flickered through the canopy, hints of warmth, a reminder that this was indeed real. He carefully pushed the blanket off, his arm reaching for the satchel he'd purchased yesterday. A crumpled note rested atop it underneath a bright red apple, tiredly he tugged the lot to his side.

He stuffed the apple in his mouth, unfurling the note to an absolute mess disguised as letters.

Sup nerd, I let ya sleep in. I'm in town, come find me when you get up. I left some cash in the bag, got it from that lovely lady who sold us out yesterday. May or may not have noticed I took it. Anyway, have fun.

p.s. I left our water canister near the stream by camp, go pick it up kay? Cool see ya later.

Tossing the letter into his satchel he glanced around the campsite. Some of their stuff was missing, he assumed his companion had it. Swiftly he began stuffing things back in the satchel, he wrapped the blanket around it before throwing the strap over his head. He snatched his cloak, flinging it over his shoulders. The moment his face was covered the blue glow vanished. He took a bite of his breakfast while he headed off toward the stream. He couldn't blame her for the stealing this time, when they'd returned to their room more of those men were waiting to ambush them. They hadn't expected to deal with the wrath of a vaguely sober Kimiko. He imagined they would probably be struggling to walk the next day. **"I'm glad we got our stuff back"** he mumbled, his mouth half full. He tightly held the strap across his chest. He didn't want to spend today shopping for basic supplies.

The festival had been on his mind, the excitement barely containing the smile on his face. His legs retained a level of exhaustion from yesterday as he scuffed his feet across the dirt, the trickle of the stream getting louder. He stopped himself at its edge, eyes scanning the area for their canister. There it sat half submerged tucked among some rocks. He rolled his eyes, carefully picking it up without losing balance. **"She's lucky it didn't wash away"** he grumbled. He screwed the cap back on, shaking the loose water off its surface.

He wrapped the string around his belt, accompanying the small pouch of coin Kimiko had left him. As he turned to leave a rustle caught his attention. The calm he'd worked so hard for vanished in an instant, hands raised in a defensive manner, the half-eaten apple dropped with a splash. His hands flickered blue, a long pole-like shape spanning between them, it struggled to keep shape, the blue form swirling with gaping holes in between. He raised both hands, the scythe still trying to form as the bush actively moved in front of him. He swung.

The shape of a person caused a hesitation, dispersed on impact, turning to a thin mist. Out of the bushes stood a pale man, bandages covered large parts of their upper body, wrists and neck. **"AH! Are you okay?! I'm so sorry"** Ethan began, his arms waving about in panic. The male in front was looking elsewhere, the noise drew his gaze.

"Hm?" he looked at Ethan quizzically. **"What?"** he asked, hair stiff, white, pointed at all ends like scales. The tips were shimmering in the light, a reflection similar to gold. His eyes like a golden flame. The figure took another step, revealing more than any onlooker wanted to see.

"K-Kaizen?" Ethan stammered out.

The two wandered along the cobblestone path heading up to town, Kaizen now wore trousers that were far too short. His feet and torso bare. A thick layer of white peeking out from the bottom of one trouser leg. **"Sorry. I feel like I'm always stealing your clothes."** He awkwardly chuckled.

"I'm more concerned with the fact this isn't the first time." He started. **"What were you doing walking around the woods like that?"**

Kaizen raised his lower lip, a prolonged thought while he pondered recent events. **"I got in a fight, then I got lost"**

"So... the person you had a fight with stole your clothes?"

"Oh, no I kind of tore them up." Kaizen responded, he seemed unfazed by Ethan's confusion.

"I'm... just not going to ask anymore."

The man beside him laughed wholeheartedly, his hand on Ethan's shoulder, he tucked him into a side hug. Ethan felt so small in comparison, barely reaching the bottom of his pecks in height. **"I had no idea you guys were in town"** he released Ethan only after he returned a smile. **"Any luck?"** he asked.

Ethan shuddered; yesterday's events still fresh. **"Not yet"** he began fidgeting with his fingers, the crowds returned as they wandered through the town entrance. There were more than the day prior, stalls set up in full, at the corner of multiple streets were performers of varied types all settled on makeshift platforms. Ethan took in the hum of a stringed instrument that tore through the mob's mash of vocals. He almost lost himself in the excitement of it all. Kaizen kept to his side, his sheer size causing the crowd to keep a level of distance from the two. Every so often the top of his head would graze a low rope hanging between the buildings, the odd banner smacking him in the face if he didn't pay enough attention. **"We didn't get a chance to look around yesterday. Our lead said he was here though."** Ethan continued, he cautiously stuck close to his friend.

"A lead huh? What'd they say?"

"That someone fitting that description was helping with this year's entertainment." Ethan's smile broadened; he looked up to his companion excitedly waiting for a positive response.

"Aye, that's great!" Kaizen grinned back at him, **"There's a lot of entertainment this year."**

"Yeah... there's a stage by the tree too." Ethan's joy faltered. **"There's no end of places he could be."**

"Well, we'll do what we can." Kaizen lightly nudged Ethan. **"The stage performance should be good. I don't think they've ever had one before."** Ethan nudged him back playfully. Kaizen stopped to take in the smells for a moment, his breath deep, nearby cloth shifted slightly as though a wind had blown upwards. It flowed back down as Kaizen exhaled. **"All this food is making me hungry."**

"You're always hungry" Ethan chuckled.

Kaizen watched him as he seemingly fussed with his hood. Once Ethan released the cloth, Kaizen reached down, rustling the material about. **"H-hey"** Ethan's attempts to stop it failed, Kaizen's strength unwavering.

"I'm sure you've been told already, but you gotta relax more." He teased; Releasing his hold.

Ethan swiftly returned to adjusting the hood. **"You wouldn't understand"** he murmured gruffly.

"I understand more than you think." Kaizen chimed in, he lightly tugged Ethan away from a small group of children running past, their kin chasing after them. Ethan glanced up to him, his presence was comforting among the horde that ran around them. **"You're not on your own anymore, remember? You can lean on your friends a little."**

"Are you seriously telling me to relax around Kimiko?" he retorted. Kaizen froze, his face contorting in a near ashamed manner, his face scrunched. Ethan's cheeks puffed; lips pursed, held for a few seconds before laughter erupted, his shoulders raising as he clutched his stomach.

Kaizen, though bewildered, soon chuckled alongside him. **"While I'm here you can relax a bit."**

Ethan took a second to reset himself. Small chortles escaped every now and then as he forced himself to stand straight. **"Thanks. I'll try to keep it in mind."**

The two of them continued along the path, the odd loose stone plinking under Kaizen's weight. The street widened while passing underneath a thick stone bridge that held running water. More flyers hung from the rocks; ropes tied to metal hooks sticking out from high up. Further ahead he could see the small forest of trees leading up to the goliath that was the main draw of Nova. The stalls closer to the trees were all wooden, they'd be invisible if not for the bright paint that covered them from top to bottom. They had their own leaves carefully crafted from paper, all merging seamlessly with the planted forest surrounding them.

The street was packed to the brim with all manner of people, a few challenged Kaizen in height but fell short. Multiple guild symbols adorned the chests of travelling adventurers, all enjoying an earned day off.

The odd one or two caught Kaizen's attention, his gaze lingered on a symbol Ethan saw yesterday. A serpent coiled around a crystal. They littered the area, hiding among the crowd. A few carried pink adornments, ribbons, nail polish or brooches. He began counting them under his breath, four, five, six. They were spaced evenly, not hiding their intent as they too scanned the crowd.

"Hey!" a shrill voice carried over the mass, Ethan stopped walking, Kaizen lightly bumped into him as he failed to notice. Kimiko's head popped up from the crowd, she waved, drawing attention as she squeezed through. She pulled up beside him, though noticing the larger frame, took a short step back. **"Kaizen?"** she asked, a tad confused. **"What the hell are you doing here?"** her eyes glanced him over, falling to his trousers with a snicker. **"Heh. What's with the pants?"**

Kaizen rubbed the back of his head, a bit of a chuckle as both of them knew what was coming. **"Ethan lent them to me."**

Kimiko placed her hands together, fingers interwoven as she bowed her head. **"Thank you for your sacrifice"** the grin conflicted with her tone.

"Don't even" Ethan glared at her, he took a step forward, passing her by. **"Come on, let's just look around."** He stopped again like a thought had struck him; **"You hid your tail, right?"** he asked. The party of three all looked to see the swish behind her. Ethan's eyes rolled, Kaizen pressed a palm to his face. Kimiko stuffed it into her skirt while the general public barely noticed due to the present excitement. With that dealt with Ethan continued forward, the annoyance in full swing. **"I feel like I'm babysitting"** he growled.

The other two trailed after him, hanging back just enough to where he was in sight but out of earshot. **"I'd been meaning to catch up earlier."** Kaizen said quietly.

"Well, you lucked out. Here we are." She placed her hands behind her head, returning to her usual lax demeanour. **"Not much to talk about, we've had a quiet few days."**

Kaizen's gaze hadn't faltered, still fixed on Ethan. **"He seems to be doing better."**

"Would you believe he snaps at me almost every day now?"

"I noticed. He's almost a different person." As he spoke Ethan bumped into someone, apologising profusely while bowing his head multiple times. Both his companions mirrored each other, their eyes narrowing. **"Almost"** they echoed. Kaizen spotted him adjusting his hood again, he tore his gaze from the boy, instead looking to the woman beside him. **"He was wearing that even outside town. I could've sworn he never used to do that."**

"...Yeah. He's been jumpy since you left. Even if it's just the two of us he keeps it on." She folded her arms, her lip raising to a pout.

"Nothing happened after I left?" he asked.

"Nothing that'd cause him to do that. He's started covering his face even with the hood down." She frowned **"I guess those guys really scared him when you picked him up last."**

Kaizen pondered the thought for a moment. He took a similar stance to Kimiko's, arms folded, head lowered. They looked almost related as they mimicked each other's mannerisms. **"Hmm."** He began, his eyes closed but his pace steady, people naturally avoided his lanky frame as small things seemed to buckle beneath him, his weight heavier than he typically appeared. **"I'll stick with you two for a little bit, might ease some of the tension."**

"Thanks. That might help a bit." Kimiko gave a sincere smile, they both noticed the subsiding crowd as the street grew wider still, a lovely curve that offset to other streets, many people branching off to its edges. They passed another wearing the serpent crest. Kimiko had noticed Kaizen's gaze wander, the

mumbling under his breath had continued anytime he stopped conversing. **“There’s a lot of them this year.”** She said gently.

“Mm. So long as they don’t do anything publicly, we can’t either.” He tensed his hands, a hint of anger behind his words as he stared one down.

Kimiko lightly touched his arm, she could feel a rumbling on his skin, like it was bubbling. **“It’ll be fine.”** She reassured him, her sly grin returning. **“They’re idiots anyway, Ethan scared a horde of them off on his own yesterday, so long as we keep him in sight nothing will go wrong.”** She waved her finger in the air.

Kaizen blinked twice at her, taking a proper look around as they’d now stopped walking. **“Uh... speaking of. Where is he?”** he asked. Her face dropped; the realisation their once trio had become a duo mid conversation. Her brow furrowed, teeth bared, she clambered onto Kaizen’s shoulders without hesitation, using him for height to get a better view. As the moments passed and she couldn’t see her target, she yelled at full volume.

“GODS DAMN IT!”

A muffled yell bellowed across the heads of the crowd. Despite the horde, Ethan had found a fairly empty spot at a familiar bench. His fingers brushed across it; his cloak tucked underneath him while he sat down. A subtle breeze cut through the warm sun, creating a very comfortable atmosphere. Ethan enjoyed the surrounding joy, the streets were filled with laughter, conversation. The smells carried on for blocks, artisans were crafting things effortlessly for onlookers. He let himself drift in the moment; his anxiety pushed down so low he could barely feel it. A tightness in his chest remained, a warning of a potential problem he could deal with later.

The wood complained loudly as he rested tentatively against the back of the seat he flinched initially, the sting of yesterday’s bruise still fresh. The sun lit the bottom half of his face, his arms raised across the top of the bench enjoying the warmth blanketing his bare arms.

You can lean on your friends a little.

Kaizen’s words were a nice comfort, he knew he’d strayed from the group for a moment. If things got dicey, his friends would be there in some way or another. The fight yesterday had boosted his confidence a smidge, a subtle reminder that sometimes he didn’t have to punch or hit something to achieve a win. He figured so long as he got back to his friends by nightfall, he’d be fine.

The ease in tension following the lingering exhaustion caused a further slump into the seat. He closed his eyes, a familiar yell ongoing in the distance. If they were closer, he’d probably have fallen asleep, but he knew danger lurked nearby while he was on his own. His ear twitched from the odd footstep that edged a bit too close. He started losing track of time as he sat there contentedly. It was only after he’d sat idle nearly twenty minutes that a thought struck him.

“She didn’t tell me when to meet her.” He felt that pit in his stomach rising again, the uncertainty of this event now playing on his thoughts. He pulled forward, arms against legs, shoulders tensed. What if she had already come and gone, what if she wasn’t coming until later. How long would he have to sit there?

What if she never came at all?

His thoughts raced like a wildfire, his breath quickened, unaware he’d sat there another ten minutes in a flurry of his own thoughts. **“Hey doll”** her voice hit like a spice, his arms reacting with a tingle he couldn’t explain. His head raised sharply; he jumped on his seat as their faces almost touched. She was leaning down, the sun covered by her slim figure. He managed to avoid her gaze, quickly skirting around her to

get off the bench. She began laughing. Ethan stood dumbfounded all the while she waved her hand in his direction, chuckling away. **“You’re so jumpy”** she snickered in a playful tone.

She was dressed in black and red, boots to the thigh with heels thick enough to make her taller than himself. Hair let loose, unrestricted, the pink ribbon from yesterday tied around her neck with a bow at the side. A spider shaped hairpin pushed her hair from her face, eyeshadow a lighter shade of pink. Her red silk top was cropped, stomach exposed, curves led the eye to black tights.

His fidgeting gave away his embarrassment, the light exposing his red cheeks. **“You’re fine doll. It’s cute.”** She had a reassuring tone, gentler than before. **“I’m glad you’re here, it saved me from having to find you”**. She reached out to him, her hand clasping his wrist as she pulled him closer, with their faces near touching she smirked. Without saying a word, she spun around, the grip tightened as she took off running. Ethan dragged behind her.

“WOAH!”

“Payback from yesterday, Hun. Let’s go explore before my guard realizes I’m gone.” She playfully zigzagged through the smaller crowd, heading for the quieter side streets.

Ethan had little choice but to follow along. She clearly had a destination in mind, not once letting up as she weaved through a side street, over a small stone bridge. They went down a few steps, around another corner, the streets empty and noise seemingly distant from the two as they continued onward. Banners still lined these streets, hanging from house to house, a vibrant joy hiding even in the nooks and crannies of town. **“Where are we going?”** he asked.

“You’ll see.”

The waterways expanded and shrunk as they rounded yet another corner, at this point Ethan could hear the hustle of the masses, it felt like they’d gone in a long circle. They stopped abruptly at a dead-end. A large cobblestone wall covered both light and exit. His wrist was released, the girl turned to face him with a smug grin on her face as she took one step back. Her foot collided with the wall, it disappeared, her weight shifted backwards, her lower body vanished completely, the last thing Ethan could see was that grin as soon that too was gone without trace.

Ethan’s tongue was held captive by the shock of it all. He could only stare at the spot she once stood. He inched forward, hesitating to edge to close. He paced on the spot, the usual bad habits stirring a giggle a short distance away. **“Come on”** a hand slinked from the middle of the wall, arm missing. She held it open, unmoving. Ethan took the hint, cautiously he placed his hand in hers, the moment they made contact he was hauled forward.

The street around them erupted in colour. People flooded the road, performances ongoing as they had before. The street itself was the same as he remembered, however the town’s symbol lined every hanging banner, painted in bold on each stall, a feature lacking from the main street. Figures wandered past them, a tail swishing behind, ears matching with no attempt to be hidden. Ethan flinched, his eyes darting from person to person as he noticed more. A woman with skin shimmering in the sunlight, parts of her body were translucent, showcasing the water beneath its surface. Hair thick, reaching her lower back in a beautiful blue and green gradient. Next to her was a humanlike figure, everything as you would expect until it reached their ears, long, pointed outwards, three times the length one would expect.

What he assumed were the usual hanging banners, floated completely unbound by the restraints of anything else. A glowing rune etched into both corners. Petals fell from the sky, a performance from a nearby elven mage, one hand skyward while the other cradled a book tenderly. The petals seep through everything, containing no physical form, reminiscent of home. Proudly displayed on their robes was a treelike shape with an insect at its centre. Ethan felt a tug in his chest, a pain battled against the excitement, soon smothered by his other senses as water swirled through the air. It sparkled in the sunlight; he felt his jaw sit agape. It took various forms before disappearing down the street.

"I thought you'd like it." The woman smiled, her fingers caressing his arm.

"Y-yeah. This is amazing" he hadn't noticed her touch, his mind elsewhere, taking in the sights, only now noticing the magical items being sold at nearby booths. It was overwhelming in a good way. As another person walked by, their body covered in thick fur, tail swishing behind them, Ethan grounded himself. **"Wait, isn't this dangerous?"** he asked, his voice shaking.

"Hunters can't get in here" she replied a bit more sternly, her hand now removed from his arm as she stepped forward. **"You can take your hood off here."**

Ethan took off after her, his hands lightly clutching the brooch holding his cloak together. **"I'd like to... but I can't."** His eyes glanced the mage a second time. Her disappointment made him hesitate, but he steeled himself. She gave a smile continuing her little stroll, lightly cupping his hand in hers as they walked along.

"UGH! STUPID ETHAN!" an unfortunate crate collided with Kimiko's boot. The fury in her voice was evident as she struck it twice. **"Where the hell did he go!?"** she growled.

Kaizen stood out of harm's way while she went on her little rampage. **"Calm down, I'm sure he'll come back this way"** he tried to reason with her, but instead became the target of her ire.

"He's stupid! AND he's got most of our coins!" she snapped, her feet pacing back and forth.

"Now now, you don't need to throw insults at him."

"No. He IS stupid. Yesterday he got scammed by an old lady, then he was dumb enough to get caught up in a situation I had completely under control and got himself beat up!" She wagged her finger in Kaizen's face. He chuckled lightly. **"What the hell are you laughing at!?"** She screamed louder.

"I didn't know you cared so much" he grinned.

"I don't! He's just so damned useless." She grumbled, her volume sinking to a normal level. **"He can't actually hit his target properly, and he lost his staff."** She continued.

Kaizen's brow raised, a knowing look as he stared her down. **"Did he lose it or--"**

"Okay okay, I MIGHT have accidentally.... Purposefully pissed off a mana boar, and our stuff kinda..." She threw her hands up, annoyed with it all. **"I got a few things back, but I haven't told him yet. I know he'll look smug as hell like the little goblin he is."** She glowered.

Kaizen lightly petted her head; She was unable to stop him even after attempting to swat it away. **"We can split up and look for him."** He suggested.

"Screw that! I don't need two idiots to look for." She snuck out from under his hand, her hat dropping midway. Kaizen swiftly scooped it up while she stomped off. **"We're going this way"** she declared. **"I'm going to put a leash on him when I find him"**

Ethan pressed himself against the wall of a nearby shop, a stall wedged between while two sat in front barely allowing enough space for the door. A tiny window between the lot is where Ethan found a hiding spot. Able to see enough without being in the middle of the chaos that was a happy crowd. He kept a firm gaze on any passerby. Not a single hunter in sight.

A short distance from him was his companion, surrounded by onlookers, her body moved gracefully, her hair flowed behind her form as she effortlessly spun in place. Her foot lightly slid across the ground

making little to no sound. As her movements came to a halt the crowd applauded, the odd few were spellbound. Ethan smiled, he watched her interactions, lightly grasping people's hands, thanking them for watching her, she even blew kisses. While a small girl cheerfully chatted away to her, Ethan caught a speck of their conversation. **"Thank you miss Teresa."** The moment clicked that this was the first time he had actually learned her name.

"Phew, sorry doll." Her fingers slid through her hair, flicking it out to the side, she slinked up beside him. Tenderly she scooped his arm in hers, tugging him from the wall. **"Shall we continue our little adventure?"** she asked.

"Y-yeah." He stammered out, his cheeks reddening again as she stood incredibly close. Her chest periodically rubbed against his arm. She tactfully pulled him away from the crowd, her eye darting to a figure with blue hair. She drew herself closer, drawing all his attention as she waited for them to pass.

He found himself unsure how to act as this was more contact than he was used to. She however was unphased, her excitement spiking anytime they passed something shiny. She dragged him toward any stall that held gems of any kind, picking up a few small trinkets for herself. As they passed by a bookstore Ethan felt his eyes wander, but before he could get a good look he was dragged away.

As the day lingered on, Ethan found himself carrying most of her bags, they'd stopped at a small bridge overlooking a larger stream of running water, Teresa sat on its edge while Ethan leaned against it. She held a thin batter filled with cream and fruit. **"Um. So, Teresa huh?"** Ethan asked.

"Ooh, you know my name. How sneaky" she said with a chuckle.

"Ah. Sorry. I heard it earlier." Ethan rubbed the back of his head, the nerves picking up as he realized his statement could have come off rude.

"Since you have mine, it seems only fair you'd give me yours." She took another bite of her sweet. Unbothered.

"Ethan" He expected little reaction, but she seemed pleased with his response. **"So, Ethan huh?"** she teased, her lips smirking, she took another bite of her snack before gazing at the sky, legs kicking loosely. **"This has been nice."** She spoke with sincerity.

"Yeah." Ethan agreed. **"Things aren't normally this...calm."**

"Oh? You typically get into trouble then?" she finished off her food, both hands rested against the warm stone she sat on. Ethan became timid, turning away from her like a small child. **"Oh ho, you do."** She lightly gripped his cheek, stretching it out while she wiggled her hand. They shared a small laugh between them. **"Me too."** She said quietly. She looked a little saddened, her eyes watching her dangling legs. Ethan noticed her smile dim, the pain in her tone being one he was familiar with, he heard it so often from his own mouth.

A gap etched between them, Ethan struggled to fill it, being around others was still so new that words were such a struggle to think of during moments like this. They both sat in silence, her lost in her own train of thought. *Am I not allowed to see the face of my hero?*

It...should be fine. Right?

Teresa glanced in his direction. Her little world broke as he lightly gripped the edges of the hood, tentatively he pushed it back just a smidge, enough so that the light hit the majority of his face. A lock of brown hair settled between his partially closed eyes, a few other strands nearing the edge of his face, peeking out from the hood. His ears appeared human; the tips cut off by cloth. His brows furrowed, eyes slowly looking toward her as his cheeks started to grow flushed. His eyes were swirls of light blue; the colour never idle as it danced. Every so often a hint of a butterfly flickered in its centre.

The silence continued, her whole being mesmerized by them. She stared at him in a way that was different to before. He could see her eyes clearly, a beautiful pink surrounded by black. That strange fog that often lingered wasn't there at present.

"Uh... Um. D-Do I look weird?" he asked. His eyes darted from hers.

She caught herself, swiftly looking away in turn. **"Sorry. I-"** her cheeks flushed red, something she seemed surprised by. She slid herself off the stone ledge, her feet back on solid ground turned away from him. **"Let's just continue our little adventure doll."** Ethan pulled his hood forward, the two pressing onward.

They wandered by a large fountain, rushing water overpowering the sounds of the nearby crowd. Settled atop it was a boy, hanging from the top. One arm covered his eyes from the sun, the other firmly holding the tip of the stone. His hair reached just below his chin, a dull blue, two ears perked on its top in the same colour. A thick bushy tail wagged about in a playful manner. The rim of his pant legs drenched while one foot stood submerged in water, the weight of it dragging the top on one side. His chest was covered in a tight fabric, arms bare, the shirt climbing up his neck half way.

"Hey! We talked about this. Get off of there!" The sudden call startled him, his grip faltering as he tumbled backwards, head first into the bottom tier of the fountain. Water splashed the surrounding stone, a few passersby catching the same fate. They swiftly hurried along as the water continued to spill out, the boy rolling about.

"Ow." He sat upright, water dripping from anything presently not submerged.

A hand extended in front of him. **"Sorry. Didn't think you'd fall in."**

The boy raised his head, a quick glance at the cause of his plight, a big smile crept onto his face. **"Boss!"** he cheered, grabbing his hand gleefully. Kaizen pulled him from the water, his bare feet touching the warmed stone. Each step created a harmonious squelch. **"Where've you been!? You were gone for like, four days."**

Kimiko stepped into view of the two, arms folded. **"You lost each other for four days? What the hell were you two doing?"** she snickered.

The boy's smile grew even further, arms outstretched, an aimed hug, still dripping. **"BIG SIS!"** Her hand collided with his forehead, keeping his shorter frame at a distance. He flailed wildly, smile never faltering despite their continued space apart. **"It's been forever!"**

"Maybe we should keep it that way." She tightened her grip. **"Oh gods, you're getting water all over the place."** She instinctively shifted to cover herself, creating an opening to escape her clutches. He hugged her waist tightly, the grin intensifying, he looked like he could explode from sheer joy. Her clothes dampened immediately; the disgust evident.

"I appreciate you looking for me Ty, but you shouldn't be climbing stuff. I'll get an earful" Kaizen scolded him. Kimiko's hand batted Ty in the face, forcing him to let go.

"My bad. But I wasn't looking for you." He said bluntly, now standing a distance while Kimiko attempted to wring the bottom of her shirt. Just as she was relatively happy with it, Ty lowered his head, twisting it to the side, his chest followed, his whole body shook violently like a dog, water flying in all directions. A few walking by were sprayed without warning. Multiple women squealed as they ran past, a beast man gave his approval with a hearty thumbs up, and a muscular man with brown short hair and green eyes seemingly ignored it all despite his shirt getting wet. His *big sis*, was not pleased in the slightest, now bubbling with a rage that could only be contained by Kaizen physically holding her back. **"Well. I kinda was looking for you, cause Tama asked me to, but I dropped my two coins and I thought I could see them if I was up higher."**

"Wouldn't that be harder since they're small?" Kaizen chimed in. **"Where'd you drop them?"**

Ty smiled, the other two shared a glance as if they knew what was coming next. **"I forgot!"** he said gleefully.

"UGH, okay I'm just going to ignore you. We have dipstick one, now we just need dipstick two." Kimiko threw her hands up, her fury held no weight against his unrivalled stupidity.

"Ooh! I'll help!" Ty swung his arms; he took large strides swiftly marching past the two. **"I'll go this way!"**

His parade was stopped early as Kaizen and Kimiko both grabbed a shoulder. **"Oh no you don't"** they spoke in unison, pushing Ty back in place.

"You don't know what he even looks like." Kaizen sighed. **"Besides we wouldn't have a way of contacting you, you have my crystal."**

The mention of a crystal made Kimiko's ears twitch, she hastily grabbed Ty's arm, yanking him in her direction as she rifled through his pants pocket. **"H-hey!"** The little brother protested, she ignored him as her hand curled around a rough surface, cold, a metal rim around its base.

"YES!" she cheered.

Ethan perused a couple of books, an old habit coming over him as he read through various titles, the old book smell taunting him with a good purchase. As he picked up yet another one, Teresa rolled her eyes. She stared at her nails. Small shiny stones embedded in a pattern keeping her boredom at bay. While he had been engrossed in his own little world, he had also noticed her boredom. **"What time was your show?"** he asked, putting things back before returning to her side.

The focus having shifted, she became more engaged. **"It's just after sundown."** She stood at the door, holding it open, Ethan swiftly picked up her bags. Once his hands were full, they returned to the street. **"Are you going to come?"** she asked him.

"Yeah. I wouldn't miss it." He reassured her.

She seemed pleased enough, her hands tucked behind her, hips swaying heavily with every step taken. Those behind often stopped to peek in her direction. **"Good. I'd hate for you to miss it."**

A sudden thought struck him. He halted, the bags lightly scraping the ground as he began rummaging through his satchel. The noise caught her attention. It took a few moments but he eventually brought out a piece of paper. He juggled his bag and hers while holding it out to her. **"I keep forgetting to ask, but do you know this person?"** He asked. She took it in both hands tenderly. **"Someone said he might be working with the entertainment."** He continued. She held the image closer, the light shining off its corner, partially obscuring it. A very clear tattoo sat on the shoulder of a very muscular male. Her face contorted; eyes narrowed. She stared at it in silence.

Her smile returned. The photo returned in his direction. **"Nope. Sorry doll."** She said quietly.

Ethan tentatively took it back, hiding behind a tired smile. **"Thank you for checking. I appreciate it"** he returned it to the bag.

As he did so, a loud yell came from deep within the leather, smothered by items on top. **"ETHAN YOU DOLT!"** The pair jumped, Ethan's hands shaking as he almost dropped everything. **"ETHAN! ETHANETHANETHAN-"** the noise kept increasing, Kimiko's shrill voice grating the ears of all passersby. He began fumbling about, placing Teresa's bags down while simultaneously trying to dig through his satchel. Teresa covered her ears, her face scrunched during the onslaught, there was not so much as a breath in between. Finally, he found it, dragging it out into the open. The sound near screeching.

"I'm here!"

In his hand was an orange crystal, it shone brightly anytime sound came from it. A metal ring at its base, in its centre was a small indent, big enough to slot something into it.

"Oh. There you are." Her tone shifted entirely, now chipper. **"Where are you?"** she asked. Ethan gave an apologetic bow to Teresa while Kimiko spoke. In turn he received a silent giggle, her finger to her lips.

"I'm... uh. I don't know where this part of town is." He said quietly.

"Ugh" she complained. Some static-like noises interrupted her.

"Yo! Think you can make it to the big tree?" Kaizen had taken over; a loud crunch came from behind as something broke in the background. Ethan felt a bead of sweat fall down the side of his cheek, the idea of seeing a furious Kimiko was not appealing, compared to Teresa who gave him a gentle smile. **"You there?"** Kaizen asked again.

"Ah y-yeah. I can do that." He stammered.

"Cool. We'll see you in a bit then."

"HURRY UP!" Kimiko's voice rang from the background. With that the crystal dimmed, a thankful silence.

"Sorry about that." He murmured.

"It's fine. Your friends are charming." The smile lingered. **"Well, I suppose that means our little adventure is over."** She took a step closer, leaning in so their faces were close. **"Shame"** she whispered. Ethan flinched; his heart stopped as he felt her breath on his lips. She looped her fingers around the handles of her bags, leaning back. **"I'll see you tonight, Mr Reaper."** She lifted one hand, blowing a kiss in his direction before walking past him.

Ethan found himself spellbound; the outside world non-existent as he watched her walk off into the crowd. It felt like a dream; a giddy excitement took the reins as he grinned from ear to ear. With a sharp turn he briskly headed off in the direction of the tree. An intense stare followed his movement, a tall muscular figure stood immobile, their features covered by the ever-moving crowd, all except for a tattoo settled on their left shoulder. An upside-down triangle with a vertical line on either side attached to its edges. A small dot at the top.

"Etthaaannnnn" a grinding continuous hum ran through one ear, hands tightly gripping his cloak, she shook him violently. **"Where have you been!?"** she growled. The shade of the tree covering not just them but the majority of the centre of town. People were hanging lights on its branches, a preparation for the coming performance. They looked like flowers, unlit as it was too early.

"You told me to relax and have fun" he snapped back.

She stopped, abruptly letting go as if shocked by his statement. **"...I did say that."**

Her scowl turned to a grin, a sense of overwhelming pride as she raised her eyebrows, eyelids half closed, she smirked at Kaizen. **"I'm such a good teacher."** She gleamed. Both boys looked unamused, Ethan however was relieved he was no longer the source of her ire.

"So, you ready to look around? We still got time before the main shows start" Kaizen asked.

"Oh, uh. I'm a bit tired if I'm honest" Ethan responded, his hand grazing the back of his head. **"Yesterday is catching up with me a bit."** He could still feel the sting of the bruise, his feet throbbing

with each step, the relief from leaning against something seemed to make each subsequent step worse. As the other two pondered the situation they'd found themselves in.

Ty made his appearance known, he held his hand out to Ethan, a thick hat atop his head similar to Kimiko's. **"Hi dipstick number two!"** he said with gusto, his chest puffed out.

Kimiko burst out laughing, her bellows loud, arms wrapped around her waist as she cackled. Ethan glared at her. **"That isn't his name Ty."** Kaizen sighed. **"Sorry, he's a bit of a goof."** He placed his hand on Ty's head, the kid chuckling while Kaizen closed a fist, furiously rubbing it across Ty's skull. His other arm curled around his shoulders, holding him in place. **"Ain't that right you little goofball?"**

"Ah!" Ty tried to escape, a futile effort. Kimiko pulled Ty's cheek as she saw the opportunity. He tried to fight back verbally, his words a jumble as his cheek was outstretched. The three laughed among themselves. Ethan watched the interaction with a shred of jealousy, the three in front of him were bound together in a way he couldn't join.

"His name is Ethan." Kaizen said quietly, he released him. Kimiko did the same but not before pulling his cheek out further, it snapped back in place.

Ty's eyes sparkled. **"That's even better!"** he said excitedly, he returned to his previous position, hand outstretched. **"Hi Ethan! I'm Ty! It's nice to meet ya!"**

Ethan hesitantly shook his hand, this kid looked no more than fifteen. **"It's nice to meet you too."** He said quietly.

"Did you know they have elven fruit here?" Ty asked, his fists waving excitedly, tail wagging while it was stuffed into his trousers. The rustle caused a snicker from Kimiko.

"They do?" Ethan asked, a twinge of excitement coming from his own tone.

Kimiko grinned, stepping between the two. **"They sure do. Would be a shame if we didn't get any before we had to leave. This Festival is today only."** She spoke with an obvious pout her body language repeating her words, however her smug expression always lingered. Regardless Ethan had an interest, if everything was gone tomorrow then he wouldn't be able to see something like this again. Ty began listing the nice things they had, not realising he was perpetuating Kimiko's case, as she began doing the same.

He scrunched his fists, the annoyance of it all creeping in as he released it all with one loud sigh. **"Fine. I guess we can look around for a while."** He said quietly, his shoulders slumped as he'd given in. The two badgers began to celebrate.

Kaizen smiled. **"We'll take breaks on the way"** he reassured him.

The group spent the next few hours roaming the streets, Ty hauled Kaizen about, Kimiko often stealing him to look at something else. He held a near mountain of food, every odd step something new would fall to the floor, Kaizen ate most of it on his own, an endless hunger that nothing seemed to sate. Kimiko had a headband set atop her hat, shaped like her usual cat ears. While Ethan trailed behind the group, Ty's excitement and dim-witted behaviour was refreshing, he found himself laughing more than once.

With the night soon approaching, the street lights began lighting up one at a time. They made their way to the main stage, the lights among the small trees creating a beautiful garden of glowing flowers. The glow so bright as though day had never left, such a vibrant and lit space brimming with life. The main draw still being the tree in the centre, all the hand-crafted flowers that had slowly been added over the course of the day were finally alight. They sparkled, the whole tree filled with glowing bright pinks, blues and

yellows. The people surrounding the centre stage were packed together, shoulder to shoulder, excitedly waiting for the show to start.

Kaizen stayed near the back, Ty bounced next to him, unable to see. He heaved him onto his shoulders. Kimiko dragged Ethan through the horde, squeezing through people as she got them both to a better spot. Ethan tiredly shadowed along behind her, her hand firmly holding his. They ended up in the centre of it all, enough of a distance to where the stage was easily visible, but not too far, that they'd be able to leave without issues. Ethan's exhaustion was playing with him, but as this was the last event of the day, he figured things would be fine. He scoured the crowd, eyeing those around the stage as he hoped for a familiar face.

The sky lost the last of its light, Ethan felt a strange sensation overtake him. The feeling of being watched sunk into his core, throwing him on edge. He began searching for its source, but their surroundings made it difficult, there were more people than he could see over, the trees along the path obscuring half the possible crowd. As Kimiko noticed his erratic behaviour, she tapped his shoulder. **"Calm down. You'll be fine"** she reaffirmed with her usual grin.

Ethan returned his sight to the stage, that feeling loitered, but she was right. He wasn't alone, his new friend would be sad if he missed her event. *Right. I keep overthinking everything. It's fine.*

The stage lights flashed; the crowd silenced as a mass of red glitter gracefully advanced across the platform. Dark pink hair braided, adorned with beautifully hand carved flowers. A see-through shawl hung from her arms, glistening in the light as it too was littered with another shiny material. Covering her form was a split red dress, flaunting her many curves, her chest almost bare. Hanging from her neck was her ribbon, with a red gemstone between the ties of the bow. She came on in silence, many bystanders in awe. Ty almost fell from Kaizen's shoulders while he leaned forward. **"She's so pretty!"** he called out.

As she reached centre stage, she raised one hand skyward. She positioned herself in such a way that boasted her figure. With one click of her fingers the music began. Fast, passionate, whirrs of strings accentuating her sharp movements. Her other hand raised; fingers snapped again. This time drums boomed loudly; this signalled all the other musicians to start their piece. She took full advantage of the moment to begin her dance.

The crowd was enamoured, their enjoyment apparent as many cheered. The group began to expand as a ring of people stood at its edge. Kaizen had taken notice, two people stood behind him as if to cut off a potential escape. While Ethan had continued to enjoy the show, his companion's face had darkened, she watched a strange cloud of perfume emanate from the stage. The people in front of them were acting strangely, what started with happy cheers and chattering among friends, had become eerily silent, the odd person questioning the one beside them as they seemed unresponsive.

Ethan felt the world slowly disappear; replaced by a beautiful cloud of rouge pink with her spotlighted in centre stage. The music a mere whisper, like every other outside influence. Her voice graced his ear, as if she was so close he could touch her. Words he couldn't make out, but it held a firm grip on all his senses. The cloud slinked around his body, a hand stroking his arm and chest, a pressure covered various parts of him like she was caressing him tenderly, his heart set in his throat. Something was wrong, but his body refused to move, all he could see was her, her hair, her smile, her eyes, her curves. Her smell was intoxicating, a scent he couldn't place, her voice overpowering her touch like a drug that held him in place. Something within him kept it from taking over. It pleaded with him to take control.

"COME ON!"

His body fell backwards, foot barely catching himself as he was yanked from his spot, hand held by something he couldn't see, buried by the fog. **"Move!"** this voice he recognised, it drowned out the one in his ear, one by one he felt that hold on him die out, he could hear Kimiko's voice, feel her hand holding his, pulling him between people as she rushed to the edge. The smell fading with each passing step, people slinked into view from nowhere, the fog still seeping into the corners of his vision. They bumped

into groups of the crowd, squeezing by while they gave no acknowledgement. All that mattered to the majority of this mob was the performance.

They neared the edge; a whisper began in unison from those nearby. **Pin them down.** It started small, but as Kaizen came into view, it had grown into a chant. More than half the crowd now in full agreement. The few who weren't panicked, desperate cries to their friends or family that were held captive. Kaizen held the same query; Ty had become erratic while still sitting on his shoulders.

Finally pushing past the last of the crowd, into the open, Teresa's voice rang out from on the stage. **"You know what to do."** She spoke in a sinister tone, that same voice that had been so sickly sweet earlier today filled Ethan's soul with dread. The entire crowd erupted into violence, the chants becoming war cries as they began pinning others to the floor. Anyone with an inhuman trait was targeted first. Their friends turned on them without a second thought. Ty began grabbing at Kaizen, his usual friendly demeanor, gone entirely.

A woman nearby grabbed at Ethan's cloak, the brooch climbing to his throat. His arm continued to be pulled forward, the force creating a struggle to breathe. Another joined suit, tugging his hood, another at his cloak. He fumbled with the clasp on the brooch, a sudden click reducing three to gravity's whims. He lunged forward, catching himself with Kimiko's assistance. His cloak fell to the ground, the brooch in hand as he clung to it for dear life.

The blue mask flickered across his face, an attempt to keep his face hidden out of pure fear. They pushed forward; the threat more evident as another person was thrown to the floor beside them.

The group circling the crowd stood enough of a distance to avoid the violence itself, instead containing it from spilling out further. They formed a solid boundary, filled with strong armed men and women. Ethan recognised a few of their faces. The man who attacked him yesterday stood proudly in the way of their retreat.

"Where do ya think you're goin?" he chuckled, those beside him giving him space to flex his muscles. **"The show ain't over-"** before he could finish his sentence Kimiko released Ethan's hand, she flipped over the top of the brute, her foot collided with the back of his leg, he fell to his knees. She spun herself around, her leg slamming directly into the side of his head. He flew sideways, unable to react. She held no grin, no teasing nature, her expression burning with a silent fury. Ethan took the hint, he sprinted through the gap, Kimiko trailed after him.

Kaizen struggled with Ty, his attempt to stop him, while also trying not to fall over was proving to be a touch difficult. **"Come on buddy, what's gotten into you?"** He shifted in tiny steps to keep balance, his right leg eventually tripping on a loose stone, they both tumbled down. Ty needed no recovery time, he climbed on top of Kaizen, pinning him to the floor, his eyes clouded in a pink hue. While it caused a bit of a strain, Kaizen was able to sit himself back up, however other people began to forcefully push him back to the stone floor.

Ethan leaned his back against a wall, his breath ragged. They'd settled themselves in a nearby alley, away from the chaos but still within view. **"Did you see Kaizen?"** Ethan asked.

His question was ignored, Kimiko was preparing to head back in, rummaging through the bag she'd kept around her shoulders. She pulled out a short metal staff, intricate engravings covered the middle. She flicked it hard, the two ends sliding out, they clicked in place to create a longer weapon. **"You got it back."** Ethan said quietly, a shock in his voice as she then stood to leave.

"They'll be fine." She answered, her wrist twisting the pole effortlessly as if to reaffirm her skill with it. **"I'll be back in a minute."** She spoke sternly.

“Wait, I can help!” Ethan pushed away from the wall; his stance sloppy the odd wince from the pressure on each foot.

She placed her hand out in front, halting him from following after her. **“No offense Ethan, but I can’t look after you right now.”** She ran off without another word, leaving Ethan on his own.

He felt an ache in his soul. *She’s right.* He wasn’t useful in a situation like this. He could barely look after himself, let alone anyone else. He looked down at his hands, the brooch still nestled in his palm. He lightly ran his finger across it. **“If you were here this wouldn’t be as hard”** he whispered. He placed his back against the wall again. The shrieks and yells of the violence still at arm’s reach seeping into his paranoia, that feeling of being watched had never left, merely smothered by the chaos that was their present situation. He tightened his fist, his mind abuzz as he tried to think more rationally.

I can’t just be idle forever.

Watching amidst the crowd stood the man from earlier, their focus unbothered by the anarchy, eyes fixated on the glowing blue aura coming from the alleyway. Slowly he began walking through the crowd, not a single person daring to stand in his way.

Chapter 3

Kimiko ran back into the fray, leaping over the ring of muscle that attempted to maintain the rim. Her staff swung into the chest of a man holding down a child, horns uncovered on their head. The kid continued crying loudly, their father lay beside them unconscious, the man who’d been hit having similar features to them both. A strong smell of iron cut through the air, people screaming, yelling, running, slamming, punching. It was near impossible to tell friend from foe by look alone. Among the chaos it felt like an invisible force was aiding them, the roots of the tree groaned, they twisted abruptly causing the ground to become uneven, the cobblestone path shook, large chunks coming loose. People lost balance, allowing the scared to gain distance. Kimiko eyed the crowd, looking for her companion. As if to answer her question a group of three flew skyward, an erratic spur of golden flames spiralling in place. Standing in the middle, untouched by the heat, was Kaizen, his arms and legs covered in protruding thick white and gold scales, glimmering claws held Ty by the shirt. His pant legs were torn, a large scar revealing itself on his right leg.

He lowered himself, arm raised as he prepared to jump, Kimiko smacked another guy in the face, knocking him over as the ground cracked, a shake so violent people nearby fell over, various stones jumping, the spot he stood dipped down in a crater, wide cracks threatened to expand from the depths. He landed on a nearby rooftop, expression blank as he hung Ty from a pole. Their arms still threaten to grab hold of any limb too close. As Ty was proven unable to leave, Kaizen took a step forward, his body falling from the roof, back to the ground with another massive thud, the impact was as though a giant beast had just landed in front of them. The flames danced around him, catching the edge of the wood from the building behind. **“That’s ENOUGH”** he roared, his voice booming, shaking a few from their influence. People began regaining some semblance of humanity, swiftly fleeing the scene with a terror not felt before. The ring of muscle were strained as a wave flocked to them. They stood firm, refusing to budge, as a few of their own began to assist in the initial goal.

Kimiko smirked, that sickening glee slinking across her face as she furiously twirled the staff. **“Oh, gods I’ve missed this”** she gleamed, both her and Kaizen aimed for those at the edge.

Kaizen’s strikes were brimming with fire, scorching the ground as a threat. He avoided actually hitting anyone directly, his mere presence scaring them into some rationality. The odd daredevil choosing to risk

it all, were soon knocked to the ground with one hard hit to the head. Kimiko did the same, aiming for the stagehands over all others so people could start retreating. She slid under the legs of one, her staff tripping them, the moment they hit the floor she hit them hard in the chest, knocking the wind from them. The number of opponents felt never dwindling, Kimiko could feel the exhaustion begin to settle in as she knocked down a beastly woman, a lanky elf, a starstruck human, one after the other piling in her direction with no self-control, adrenaline was running high as she continued her escapade.

After clearing enough of a path for civilians to leave through, her eyes glimpsed the alleyway. The light that once lingered there was gone. **“Ethan?”** she murmured. The distraction caused her to forget their surroundings. A person landed on top of her, pushed from a scuffle nearby.

“All alone love?” a mass of muscles covered in a thick leather coat stood at her side, blood trickling down the side of his head. **“Should watch what you’re doin”**. He glowered down at her, both fists raised. As his hands hit their peak a rope looped around them both, it pulled tight. A force heaving him upwards to the looming tree overhead. Ethan swiftly passed him in the opposite direction, his feet lit up to match the lights above. The moment he was off the ground, the rope was tied. Ethan landed midair, carrying even more rope as he swiftly moved to grab another that hung between the rooftops.

The fight continued, Ethan did his part, assisting once in a while by pulling someone up to the branches of the great tree in the middle, Kaizen scared people into leaving of their own accord. Kimiko gleefully struck down anyone who chose violence. The majority of the fighting had been between the crowd itself, people had injured one another to a point where they struggled to move, the odd few who were okay, desperately tried to carry their comrades to safety while there was a clear path out.

Ethan after stringing up yet another person with pink coloured nails felt his vision blur. Sweat trickled down his brow, his breaths laboured. He attempted to take another step as he had prior, the tiny platforms he’d created under foot destabilizing. He tumbled toward the ground, the adrenaline kicking in as the cobblestone felt so close. He flexed both hands, a glowing blue platform appearing underneath him for a split second, enough to slow his current velocity. It held for a second before he tumbled further, with the ground an inch away he managed to spin himself around, landing on his feet. A sharp pain rippled through his legs; his balance wavered, he rolled onto his back. He’d fallen beside the tree, within the chaos but the people around him were out cold or no longer fighting back, the noise had dulled considerably, the fighting must have plummeted to only a small few. He was content with his assistance even if it was minor.

The blue mask that covered his eyes and ears was struggling to maintain its form; it swirled erratically leaving small gaps at random. He forced himself to sit up, his limbs groaned, the tree his only support as he got back upright. There was no way he could continue, the next step was to get out of this mess, he didn’t want to become a burden. He turned, something solid struck his stomach with a force so fierce he flew off his feet, spiralling backwards. He flipped over, tumbling across the ground, he came to a stop in an open space, lungs burning, air stuck midway as his whole body writhed in pain. He took short gasps, struggling to breathe out as he cradled his stomach. His arms were covered in small scrapes from stone.

Step

Step

Step.

While he lay there, a scuffed set of footsteps stopped at his side. His body went cold, that gaze he’d felt all night was intense, it loomed over him. His eyes snapped open, a shadowed figure staring him down, the nearby lights only illuminating his silhouette. They towered over him, their upper body extremely well built, hair was short, a fringe at the front. The colour was difficult to see, as his sight was already failing him.

A brief moment of confusion set on the man's face, as if to ask how he was still conscious. **"Sorry kiddo. I'll make this quick"** his voice was deep, sad, familiar. It had a gentle tone despite the resulting pain of his last attack. Ethan's mind raced, the word *kiddo* repeating in every part of his brain.

The figures fist raised above Ethan's chest; the spike of danger gave him enough strength to roll out of the way. It thrust into the ground instead. He scrambled back to his feet, his body aching as he shuffled out of harm's way. He stared at his opponent, an image flickering atop their form as though his eyes played tricks on him. Their short hair lengthened to the shoulder, stubble lining their cheeks and chin. The shortness of breath caused a light headedness. The figure raised one hand toward their face, a firm fist, their other hand was further forward. The stance was familiar, but he couldn't place it. They were light on their feet.

Ethan felt a lump form in his throat, his friends had their hands full, he was at a distance. No one could help him.

He felt his own hands shake, they raised, fists clenched, his legs shuffling backwards anytime this hulking monster shifted forward. **"I-I'm not afraid of you."** he responded, attempting to mimic the man's pose. His mask was faltering, whole chunks of his face becoming visible on and off. His voice raspy, strained. He swayed from foot to foot. Clearly struggling to keep himself upright. The man frowned, barely visible in the dim light.

He eased his stance, fists loose as he inched forward again. Ethan shuffled back once more, the desire to get out of here, screaming at him, running no longer felt like an option, his legs weren't working properly. Everything he was able to achieve at this point was from pure fear, the man's voice rang again as he took another step forward. **"I'm sorry."** He moved further this time, his step wide, Ethans couldn't keep up, the distance between them had halved. **"This isn't your fault"** he continued. **"I just have a job to do"**

Everything stopped, a few of the lights in the overhanging tree shattered, darkening them both. The man's hand outstretched. Words reverberated consistently without break.

Your fault.

Every part of him drained of heat, eyes wide, words unable to escape, body unmoving, he could only stand there as the man's hand edged closer. Closer. The light from his mask illuminated his attacker, their face laced with guilt, it was him. He knew that expression, those sad green eyes, that short brown hair, that smell, that voice. A pit in his stomach grew, overtaking him as the hand inched closer, time had slowed to near nothing, his voice refused to come out, the desperation to say his name, to call for him but he was unable. The nightmare was all but real as he found himself unable to do anything.

Please, you have to realize it's me.

He felt his fingers touch his skin, something inside him snapped, his eyes lit up, it carried across his hair as it burst into a blue fire, skin drained of colour, chest alight along with his palms. A pressure built up so swiftly the boy couldn't do anything about it.

BWOOM

A blue shockwave shot across the square, people knocked off their feet, stalls flew over, nearby buildings groaned and cracked, lights shattered, it came out as one big circle. As it headed for Kimiko, she braced herself. Tensed and ready.

But nothing happened, it passed through her without effort, untouched. Kaizen was the same. Everyone else had fallen to the ground, barely conscious, any lingering chance of that spell was gone. At its centre was the cause, Ethan's hair dimmed to its usual brown, his eyes closed, body limp, falling in place. As his consciousness left him, he collapsed into two strong arms, his blue mask completely gone.

The brute had been left untouched, a confusion even to him as he witnessed the surrounding aftermath. The boy was cradled in his arms, his coarse hand lightly brushing the hair from the boy's face, he noticed

the scar. His finger gently ran across it; a blue mist trailed his movement, it slinked across his palm, caressing his arm tenderly. **"No way."** he whispered. His eyes darted to the boy's ears, they were so human, yet pointed at the tip. **"You can't be"** His voice quivered, arms trembling.

"This can't be real"

"Ethan!? Ethan where are you!?" Kimiko's voice rang through the silence. Desperately searching through the litter of bodies, many held their loved ones, bruises sprinkled across flesh, blood painted stone, leaves blanketed everything. She glimpsed Ty, arms flailing, a sign he was still okay. the trees while now bare still blocked her vision; she scrambled up the nearest one. The height showcased more destruction. They'd done a job, but proud wasn't a word she could associate with it. She finally spotted Kaizen, standing at the base of the large tree, the only one still holding leaves. In his hands was the target of her distress. They stood alone, no other people in sight around them.

A jumble of words, a mash of voices, tones, so indistinguishable it caused a headache trying to focus on just one. A pressure pulled downwards, arms dangling freely as his eyes cracked open. The floor was moving, sticks crushed underfoot, leaves crunching with each step. Packed dirt caused an uneven sway. The words continued, three, they played one after the other, a buzz lingering at the edge, overpowering the ability to make out actual sentences. His eyes slowly closed again, reopening seconds later, the ground no longer moving, everything was still, crickets battled the voices that had dwindled to two. They talked softly, barely louder than the crackling of fire to the side. The soft touch of grass against his arms, a thick blanket covering the sight of anything else. His eyes fell closed once more, and as a second passed he opened them. Met by a ceiling, wooden beams lined across it. There were no voices, no noise at all, the blanket remained, though doubled in size, beneath him was something soft, comfortable.

He blinked once; the surroundings remained the same. Curiously he began looking around the room, a small couch set in one corner, a bed to his left, two small windows on the wooden wall nearby. Decoration seemed an afterthought, as only one small vase sat in the other corner of the room, paper flowers discoloured from the sunlight. The floors matched the walls, the only change being a brown rug between the door and bed he was presently in. As his head turned to the right, he was met with large eyes, wide, unblinking. The whites had stained red, tears stretched to the edge, dull blue hair falling around them on light coloured skin.

He managed to hold his tongue but his hand flew up instinctively, knocking Ty in the face. Both hands swiftly covered his eyes and nose as he groaned loudly. **"Ow ow ow."** Furiously he bounced around in his seat.

"Sorry!" Ethan carefully sat himself up, his back against the headboard. The small scrapes on his arms scabbed over, his shirt and cloak missing, the bruise on his back had vanished, the one on his stomach however had set a deep purple.

"Are you okay?" Ethan asked, the guilt heightened while Ty pulled strange faces. It took him a few moments before his hands returned to his sides.

"Mhm!" he spoke with a strain, a goofy smile on his face, eyes wide once again. **"I could've gotten into trouble there phew, good thing they didn't come back yet. I'm supposed to be watching you, but my eyes were closed for like two seconds."** He tried to readjust himself on his chair, his head staying still.

"...You can blink." Ethan spoke quietly.

Ty merely shook his head, his eyes focused. **"No no, I have to watch you. How can I be watching you if I blink? Duh! Then my eyes would be closed. "**

“Ah. I promise I won’t tell.”

Ty pondered the offer, the singular cog in his head turning at a snail’s pace. **“Okay”** he agreed, the hesitation lingered but he gave in, blinking once.

“Where is everyone?” Ethan asked.

“No idea. They just told me to watch you.” He responded, he looked proud of himself. **“I didn’t blink for-”** he stopped, his pride dwindling as he couldn’t remember his own achievement. **“Uh. I didn’t blink for... ages. Yeah!”**

Ethan chuckled quietly; it lightened his otherwise dreary mood. Though he didn’t know how to respond, their conversation dulled to an awkward silence. Ty continued to look in Ethan’s direction, while the boy, now feeling a tad uncomfortable, chose to look elsewhere. His eyes returned to various parts of the room, a piece of clothing caught his attention on the floor, however as he sat more upright to take a peek, a sharp sting reminded him of an unwanted memory. He glanced at the bruise on his stomach, his fingers grazing it gently. The image of that man flashed briefly in his mind, his voice, the same apology he remembered years back. Those sad green eyes. They caused an ache that had no relief. He curled up, his legs pulled to his chest, head against his knees, arms wrapped around it all as if to keep from falling apart. He felt a sting at the corners of his mouth, a smile was so hard to keep. He felt it strain, his eyes burning, tears welling up, his chest tight, the pain of the bruise perpetuating everything else.

“Are you okay?” Ty’s voice drenched with concern.

The creak of the chair next to him was another reminder that he was in fact not presently alone. *A wisp never shows emotional weakness in front of others.* Someone else’s words, they held an influence he couldn’t ignore.

He pushed the tears back, unfurling himself, he leaned back with a loud yawn. He stretched himself out, the release of tension creating a good opportunity to reset his demeanour. The edge of his mouth strained; a smile so uncomfortable it made his cheeks ache. **“Yeah. I’m fine”** he said quietly. His physical mask was gone, replaced by the will to pretend. Even his voice played the part, the quiver he felt so strongly in his throat hadn’t betrayed him.

As he began shuffling his way to the edge of the bed, the door clicked open. **“You’re up! Thank the roots.”** Kaizen stepped into the room; Kimiko tailing behind him, her ears and tail in full view. **“Had us worried for a bit.”** Kaizen cradled a large paper bag in one arm. Briskly he put it down on the empty couch. Kimiko sat on the edge of the bed, watching in silence as Ethan picked up his shirt. He dressed himself with his back turned, everything was where it should be, except for his cloak. Another thing that added to the pile of his misfortune.

He smiled it off, turning to his friends. His steps light, the pain gone, exhaustion long disappeared along with it. His hand flexed twice, a strange sensation lingering at the edge of his skin, his own aura threatening to seep out without proper restraint.

“You, okay?” Kaizen asked.

“Yeah, I feel fine.” Ethan responded quickly, an itch for a distraction. **“So, uh. Where are we?”** he asked. His hands quickly tucked behind his back as the palms glowed faintly. His shoulders tense with the stress, while he hoped they’d drop the topic.

“Hvile. It’s a small village” Kaizen leaned against the wall; he eyed Ethan with a sad stare.

“Since you’re up, we should grab something to eat.” Kimiko piped up with her usual grin, unaware of the heartache that brimmed in front of her.

“That’d be nice, I’m starving” Ethan agreed. Ty nodded profusely; Soaring off his chair in excitement.

The village itself was tiny, a handful of houses, only a few small shops. The dirt path that carried through its centre was barely wide enough for a cart. The houses were wooden, styled similar to those in Nova. The singular street was busier than anticipated, everyone who wandered about calling each other by name. There were people of all walks of life, a beast man happily selling fresh bread outside their bakery, while a human chatted alongside them. Kids play fought with sticks, all giggling as a group, one pretended to down a big beast, a fallen log.

Trees lined the village edge, the sound of nearby water overwhelming everything else. Ethan walked behind the group, his mind elsewhere while they happily chatted among themselves. The odd stare from a stranger kept him on his toes, the danger long passed, but his worries were rarely sated. A cottage sat at the edge of their path, a large sign with the word Tavern carved in wood, it hung effortlessly from metal hooks. The three in front walked in first, Ethan still a short distance behind. He stopped at a small store before it, the large window cluttered with various antiques. His eyes settled on a small deep blue crystal, carefully crafted to look like a beautiful rose. Its colour rich, the sun caught it in such a manner, that it felt alive. **“Yo! Come on slowpoke!”** Kimiko’s voice broke his focus, snapping him back to the task at hand. Hesitantly he ran after her.

A delectable cooked meal of root vegetables and grilled meat was served to the group. Ethan and Ty scoffed theirs in a race, the victor outmatched by Kaizen who swallowed everything in one go. Kimiko ignored her food in favour of the local wine. Despite his face being out in the open, he cared less than he did prior. The anxiety of it all was still there, but it was smothered by something else entirely. Held behind a smile, with words that held no real weight.

They spent the day as a unit, exploring what little the village had to offer, while also taking in the sights of the nearby waterfall. They wandered through two small stores, stopped at a travelling merchant’s cart, Ty and Kaizen frolicked in the nearby field as though there wasn’t a care in the world. A single bug threw their joy out of balance, Ty screamed like a child while Kaizen quietly moved it to another location. The poor boy refused to touch anything it stood on while raging about their many legs. It didn’t take long before night began to seep in, they made their way back to their room. Kimiko drank herself into a stupor, falling asleep the moment they got through the door, wine in hand. Ty crashed after her, the two sharing a bed, neither one sleeping under the covers. Ty’s head dipped off the edge, gravity slowly pulling him down with each exhale. Next to him was Kimiko, butt raised high, face buried in the blanket. Kaizen took his spot on the couch, he couldn’t lay on it, instead deciding to sit, his knees close to his chest. Ethan had the other bed to himself. He closed his eyes, begging for an easy rest.

His mind refused to give in to his whims, unwanted images lingered in the darkness, his voice, the ache. He lay there for what felt like hours, unmoving, pleading for it to subside. Not once did it relent, the realisation of his situation drilling deep. Things were supposed to change. He was going to see him, then things would change.

He’d be *free*.

He sat up, the dim light of the moon a small comfort. The two beside him were still snoring away, Kaizen’s head was lowered, arms folded across his chest. He looked to be sleeping, a rare occurrence. Without making sound, he slinked from the bed, a whispered creak across the floorboards as it took his weight. He tiptoed to the door, quietly escaping the room. The moment he closed it shut behind him, Kaizen’s eye opened.

The stillness of night was both disheartening and relaxing, a strange battle of emotions as he wandered back down the road, listening for the waterfall. It had been a time since he had walked outside without shoes, the dirt under his feet oddly enjoyable. The small stones however he could do without. He scrambled over a few rocks off the path, following the brush until he came to a nice clearing. A pool of clear blue sat at the base; a beautiful white reflection rippled across it as the moon hung high. Rocks built up with cascading water to the stream below. The smell of fresh water, the cool night air, the soft touch of grass, it soothed him. He set himself down at its edge, feet dipped in the water. He stared up at the moon,

surprised to be graced by two. **"Dawa is out tonight"** he whispered. **"....at least you're not alone today Wylie"**. The sight of the moon siblings tugged at his heart; family was the thing he wanted to be distracted from. Yet everything reminded him of it.

Slowly he leaned forward, his reflection staring back at him. His brown hair irked him, that sting at the edge of his mouth, his throat, his eyes, a frustration smothered in sadness that caused everything to ache. **"...Why did I have to look like you?"** He whimpered. His lip trembling, smile gone. He let the tears fall without qualm. **"You were my last hope."** His hands gripped the grass at his sides, crushing it in his fingers. Arms trembling along with everything else. Yet a part of him desperately tried to keep quiet. The tears streamed down his face, vision blurred, the heartache strangling him. **"I just wanted a little freedom."**

He wept, hunched further forward in an attempt to contain the volume. His hands covered his face, the sight of his own reflection was too much. His shoulders bled a blue steam, strands of hair pulsated in a similar hue. Every so often a figure flickered in the mist, feminine, it lingered at his shoulder before turning into a small butterfly. There it sat perched. Other butterflies followed suit, settling around him like a source of comfort. The darkness dwindled away by a beautiful light blue. It seeped into the trees, revealing a figure standing behind one of them. Kaizen stood in silence; his body hesitant to step forward as Ethan wept quietly. All he could do was wait.

The blue parted as time trickled by, a single butterfly remained on his shoulder. He lay on his side, eyes red, staring off into nothing, the odd snuffle was all he could muster, despite everything, a small part of him felt better. Yet the problem lingered.

He ignored the rustle of the grass behind him, their baggy trousers shifting about while they sat down. Both remained silent, the quiet night air the only backdrop to either one's thoughts. The company felt nice, no expectations from either side. His companion lay down beside him, the grass crunching underneath, it continued as his arms slid under his head. Ethan tentatively rolled over, the canopy of surrounding trees spiralled at the edge of the waterfall, creating a lovely window of the night sky. The two moons paired above it all.

"Couldn't sleep?" Ethan asked in a whisper.

"Yeah. You?" he responded.

"...Yeah." His voice was hesitant, a coarse texture betrayed him. Hours of strained tears had made his throat ache terribly.

Kaizen took a glance his way, quickly returning it to the sky. He shifted frequently in his spot, struggling to find a comfortable position. His finger tapped his chest, foot wobbled back and forth. After fidgeting awhile, he took in a deep breath, all his habits falling to silence.

"I..." He began. **"If you need anything. I'm here."** He sputtered out. He expected a reaction, but received even more quiet.

Ethan closed his eyes, his face gracing him with a natural smile. It was small, soon to leave, but it was the first real one he'd had since he woke up. **"Thanks."** A short pause hung between them before Ethan's voice rang again **"Did you know?"** he asked. His eyes returned to the stars.

Kaizen's heart froze, he rolled over, his back to Ethan, a childlike habit he had when he didn't want to answer a question. A response without words. **"I get why you didn't tell me...but now that I know. I don't know what to do."** He clenched his fists, his cheeks ached again, tears threatened his vision, but as someone sat so close he forced himself to hold it back. **"I don't have an excuse to travel anymore."** His voice cracked.

His arm raised above his face, rested tenderly across his eyes in an attempt to calm himself. While he lay there, something put pressure on his head, it tousled his hair a bit. He lowered his arm, spotting Kaizen, his head turned away. **"If you're not sure where to go, you can come hang out at my place for a bit."** He spoke in his usual jolly tone, a hint of insecurity, he didn't know what to do either. Ethan sat up; he pulled his head from Kaizen's hand. Lightly he smacked his cheeks, shaking his head violently in some attempt to reset himself.

"So, you'll be my excuse huh?"

"Sure. At least till you figure stuff out." They faced each other, Kaizen's big smile infectious as Ethan returned it. **"Come ere ya little goof"** Kaizen pulled him into a side hug, his hand furiously rubbing Ethan's back.

"Ah, let go, you smell so bad." Ethan laughed, pushing against his chest while he held his head away.

"Oh, you're right. Bath time then I guess." While he spoke, his hands gripped Ethan's upper arms, a stupid grin as he lifted him off his feet.

"...you wouldn't...right?" Ethan's eyes darted to the water.

Kaizen took a step forward, the grin widened. **"Yes, yes I would."** With that, he took one big step off the edge.

SPLASH.

As day trickled through the window, Kimiko cracked an eye open, the wine bottle still clutched firmly in her hand. She barely had a second thought before taking a swig. While the fresh taste of alcohol coated her mouth, she scanned the room. Ty's head was on the floor, his knees bent while his legs remained on the bed, one arm covered part of his face, the other outstretched on the wooden boards, drool lay in a pool next to his hair. Ethan lay in his bed, hair damp, clothes strewn about with a scorch to the bottom of his trousers. They looked to have caught fire at some point. He seemed content as he slept happily. Kaizen however was nowhere to be seen. She clambered off the bed, wandering over to the window. There he stood outside their building, deep in thought. This wouldn't do, Kimiko pushed the windows open, she took in a large amount of air. **"MOOORRRNNNIING!"**

Ty's legs fell from the bed, his body tumbled across the floor, Ethan similarly leapt out of his skin, falling to the side in a panic. Kaizen jumped on the spot; scales spiked across his skin in a wave from his chest to the tips of his fingers. One could see a flash of gold horns on his head, one broken midway as he restructured himself. He glanced up at her, a half assed smile while others flung open their doors or windows. Annoyed glares at a woman who gave no care for their ire.

The group stood as a whole just outside of the village, their bags in tow. Ethan and Kaizen split the carrying duty between them, despite Kaizen's insistence he could do it himself. Ty was half asleep, rubbing his eyes while he haphazardly wandered in a zig zag. The odd rock caused him to tumble. Kimiko took the lead, she walked with her hands behind her head, a good night's sleep, good breakfast, good company made her especially happy this morning. The same could not be said for the others.

Kaizen was fine, but Ethan was yawning loudly, Ty was barely conscious. Another hour or two would pass before he'd be even semi coherent. It felt like a blink before Kaizen was carrying all their belongings, Ty hanging under one arm while he dozed quietly. Ethan warily walked at his side, the uneven ground an annoyance that caused him to near trip more than once. **"...I think maybe we should stop for a bit."** Kaizen said quietly.

Kimiko turned to look at him, **“Why? We just start-”** she stopped as she caught a glimpse of the trio. Ethan tried not to fall asleep while standing, periodically catching himself anytime his balance wavered.

The journey continued once again, this time with Ty on Kimiko’s back, Ethan carried by Kaizen the same way. They walked alongside each other. **“I guess that weird thing he did was more exhausting than we thought.”** Kimiko sighed.

“Probably.” Kaizen replied. He swiftly checked Ethan, the quiet snores an obvious sign he couldn’t hear anything. With that he returned his attention to his companion. **“...He found him.”** His tone dropped.

Kimiko stopped abruptly, her grip on Ty loosened for a second. She swiftly readjusted herself. **“....so, then what? This is all over?”** she said quietly.

“For now, we’re just going to go home. He can figure some stuff out there.” Kaizen gave a smile, a hint of something else hid in his eyes.

“It’s okay. I’ll convince him to stick around.” She pushed forward with a newfound spring in her step. **“Even if I can’t, we can always visit him, it’s not that far from home.”**

Kaizen quietened, his mind so preoccupied with thoughts he refused to share aloud. Their conversation quietened to nothing as both walked along the path, heading for home.

The group passed through an incredibly dense part of the trail, leaves blanketed the sky, a very dim light seeped through its cracks. Vines curled around massive tree trunks, their height dwarfing all else. Mushrooms bled into the corners of nearby roots, forever hidden from the sun. The air was cold, something Ethan struggled with as he walked beside his friends, his hands furiously rubbed against his arms in some vague hope of warmth. Ty was unaffected, his excitement over the small objects he could find being a worthy distraction. Noticing the cold, Kaizen began shifting through one of their bags, he bit his lower lip in concentration, hand fumbling about loudly. A couple of things fell onto the dirt path, something Ethan swiftly picked up.

As Ethan stood straight, Kaizen held out a long black piece of cloth. He recognised it immediately, the tear so proudly showcased at its edge. **“My cloak”** he spoke in surprise, a genuine smile crept onto his face, his fingers timidly curled around it. **“You found it.”**

“Kimiko picked it up before we left.” Kaizen glimpsed her way, she flinched, a glare hurled in his direction.

“Thanks.” Ethan held it close, basking in the fact it was in his possession before putting it back on. He fetched the brooch from his pocket, clipping it in place, he pulled it tight around his shoulders, creating a cover for the majority of his body. It was heavy, but warm.

Kimiko wandered ahead, she hid her flushed cheeks, Ty the wandering fool slinked up beside her **“I didn’t know your cheeks could turn that colour”** his statement met with a fist to the head. She angrily kept walking, her brother following in confusion. The scenery changed so frequently as the day rolled by, lush hills filled with greenery, beautifully vibrant purple flowers sprinkled among them. The trees thinned, creating a lovely window to the blue sky above, the odd grey cloud at its edge threatening rain in the coming hours.

Ethan's fascination with newfound flora was given detailed descriptions by Ty, none of it true, yet his confidence would say otherwise. The two began creating names for things they’d never seen, exploring a silly yet creative pastime. Kimiko had joined in once or twice, mostly in an attempt to make fun of them. All was cut short as the first raindrop fell.

The group ran through the brush, the downpour drenched everything in sight. Ty was tucked under Ethan's cloak, held atop them both while running. Kaizen ran beside them, cautious not to lose anyone as the ground began to shift under foot. **"Over here!"** Kimiko's voice carried across the parade of noise. They retreated to a small overhang, water dripped either side, but the rocks beneath it remained dry. Ethan sat as far from the rain as possible, his back against the thick rocks.

"I guess we're stopping for a while." Kaizen said quietly.

"Eh, I'm sure it'll let up soon." Kimiko responded.

The mood hung dreary, rain only louder than before, pools of water settled in the open forest, the ground unable to soak it all. A campfire crackled at the edge of the overhang, the odd raindrop threatening to hit it while the wind picked up. A top was hung across the top, clothes drying overhead. A small pot filled with various smells bubbled over the firepit. All chance of light parted from the sky, night drawing its breath.

Without proper cutlery, the pot was passed around the group, each person taking a spoonful before passing it to their left. A loaf of bread was broken into pieces alongside it. Making for a pleasant meal, the intense heat of the stew battled against the cool wind. **"Mm, best one yet"** Kimiko spoke with her mouth full, the pot passed to Kaizen, he grabbed it, ignoring the handle. He seemed unphased, the only person who seemed to take notice was Ethan, he watched him spoon feed Ty before himself. He then handed it over to Ethan handle first for him to grab.

"That doesn't hurt?" he asked, forgetting the food entirely. His eyes fixated on Kaizen's hand, it wasn't even remotely red.

"Hm? What hurt?" he raised an eyebrow while he stuffed bread into his mouth.

Ethan's eyes narrowed, he was so sure Kaizen was human, but every now and then questions cropped up. He knew he could use fire magic, but he'd never seen him properly fight. Even their last encounter had set Ethan so high up he couldn't see anything more than his flames. While he pondered, Kimiko stole the pot from him. **"Hey!"**

She ignored his protest **"Gotta be quicker!"** The pot kept at arm's length while she took another big spoonful. Kaizen took it from her, eating his share as well. Ty was still open mouthed trying to quell the heat from his last lot, so it circled back to Ethan. He glared at the two, he covered the pot with his other arm, turned away from the group as he took a mouthful, scraping the bottom. The meal continued its rounds.

"So... I've been meaning to ask." Ethan started, a half-eaten piece of bread in hand. **"What happened after I passed out?"**

The group stopped abruptly; the exception being Ty, who was still acting like a fish on land. **"Well. You made like this big... uh. Like a circle?"** Kimiko put down her food, using her hands to help explain. **"There was like this big ring, and it knocked everyone out."** She continued. Ethan's eyes rolled. *Of course she'd make up a story.* He began eating again, regretting his question.

Kaizen caught sight of the boy's dwindling attention, he tensed, his hand denting the pot he was presently in possession of. **"She's right."** He said quietly.

"I don't know exactly what happened, but it's like you sent all your aura outwards, it knocked everyone off their feet, except for a handful. Everyone still standing was someone you knew."

"...So... then. Was h-" Ethan caught himself, his voice threatened to give out, it shook with his hands. It was like he wanted to say something, but it was desperately clinging to his throat, refusing to come out. No matter how much he tried, it stopped at the back of his mouth.

Kaizen's eyes brimmed with guilt as he watched this boy nervously wait for an answer. The image of that night flashed through his mind in quick succession. He knew more than he wanted. His own mouth hung agape, a desperate want to answer him honestly. **"No one was there when I found you."** Kaizen spoke quickly. He watched the boy's face slowly fall, his shoulders followed suit, his back hunched.

"I see." Ethan chuckled nervously, a forced smile replacing the frown that had come on so naturally.

"You were actually pretty resourceful for once. Though I don't know how sustainable that tactic would be long term." Kimiko tuned in. Her hands empty, food gone.

"...Yeah. I crashed midway." His smile wavered, that feeling of uselessness beginning to take hold despite the praise. He lingered on the moment; one hand lightly touched the fading bruise on his stomach.

"Eh, you just need more practice." Kimiko pinched the pot from Kaizen, grabbing the last scrape at the bottom. **"Like hitting a target. If you had your staff, you'd have been fine, but since you can conjure one you should learn the timing."** She savoured the last bite, tossing the pot next to the fireplace, spoon landing inside it.

Ethan pondered her statement. If he was stronger. If he had been able to properly fight back. Would the situation have been different? He felt his body burn, a frustration that boiled deep in his stomach. If this short trip home was all he had left, then this was his last chance to actually have training. He loitered on the question, everyone seemingly settling in for the night now that the food was done with. With a stern expression he turned to Kimiko, her back to him as she lay herself on the loose dirt. **"...Can we train on the way?"** He asked.

She remained still. **"Sure."** She yawned, tucking her arm under her head as a makeshift pillow. **"G'night."** The others in the group followed suit, the campfire their only warmth, the rain showed no sign of stopping. Ty lay sprawled out as far as his limbs would allow, he fell asleep in minutes, mumbling about cheese while kicking something unintelligible. The emotional strain on Ethan put him to sleep soon after, curled in a ball, a faint blue glow covering him like a blanket across his skin. The only one keeping watch was Kaizen, though he too was starting to drift. He leaned against the stones, head down, eyes closed, mind still very much awake, nevertheless that exhaustion lingered.

His mind replayed the events of that night, the air thick with the smell of blood, bodies lined the street, their pained groans a proof of life. The trees nearby stripped of their leaves, banners missing from their ropes, the decorations on the giant tree were shattered or blown away.

At the base of it all, was a blurred silhouette. **"Ethan!"** Kaizen called for him, running at full speed, he halted as two came into view. The young boy was limp in the man's arms, cradled so gently as his body leaned against a mass of muscle next to him. He flinched at Kaizen's appearance, tucking Ethan further behind him, placing himself in front almost protectively. **"What'd you do to him?"** Kaizen growled, his teeth bared, each one tipped to a point. The man's lip trembled, his guard waning. He looked back to the boy in his arms, then to his surroundings, his eyes dropping to the stage for a time. **"Is he okay?"** Kaizen inched closer; the man's guard dropped entirely as he carefully held Ethan back in front. The scene became more vivid, he could see people in the distance, the buildings suddenly had more clarity, the scene felt more alive than before.

Kaizen took large steps, soon standing beside one another. The two looked so similar at a closer range. The man's face lowered, arms extended, he tentatively released Ethan without a fight. The man's mouth opened, a pained expression overtaking both face and voice. **"Kaizen?"** a woman's tone came through, something so jarring it stirred him. His eyes snapped open, Kimiko's hand set on his. His arms rippled, large scales protruding through the skin, his hands clenched with golden claws, horns settled atop his head, one broken midway. His body had increased in size, a tense scaled skin spread across his chest, the swish of a tail behind him. The confusion settled, returning to a slight annoyance at the realization

he'd almost fallen asleep. He shook his head, his scales quietly retreated back where they stemmed, his horns vanished like the wind.

"Sorry." He murmured. **"Guess it's been a while since I slept."**

"Then piss off and find a place to nap. I'll watch the bozos." Kimiko gave a gentle smile, but Kaizen shrugged it off.

"Nah. It's okay, I can go for one more night."

The night faded with the rain, puddles lined the forest in mass, they glimmered under the bright sun as it peered through the canopy of leaves. The group had taken up the journey once again, their spirits higher now that the weather had cleared, clouds dotted the sky, but their fluffy white appearance held no distress. They wandered through the brush, attempting to follow a path that had long disappeared.

Kaizen walked near the front, periodically tripping over the odd root or a crack in the ground; His face dirty from colliding with either ground or tree. Ty stayed close to his side. Kimiko trailed the group, hands behind her head as she leisurely wandered behind. Eyes closed, body leaned back ever so slightly, enjoying the sunlight that flickered across her face anytime the breeze rolled in. She cracked open one eye, leaves crunched to her right. A blur of black shot behind her, blue illuminated her back as the shape of a pole swung at her. Her stance didn't change as the blue dissolved into a mist on impact. A brief yawn came from her lips as she stretched herself out. **"Nope"**

Ethan stood at her side; arms hung low, fists clenched a raging blue covered his palms, flickering in colour. His chest tightened, shoulders tensed, teeth gritted, brows furrowed. Frustration built up in such a way that his whole body trembled in it. He shook his head violently, his hands pulled apart, creating that same blue glowing pipe, holes sprinkled through it as it spiralled in his grip. It was unstable, worse than the attempt prior, but it didn't matter, he had to try again.

The same scene carried out again, a barrage of constant attempts that all ended the same way. The two at the front were barely in view anymore, they hadn't stopped even once. They seemed in a world of their own while *training* was carried out behind. Ethan stood behind Kimiko; body slumped, breaths more ragged, his vision blurred by his own frustration. **"Damn."**

"Thirty-six for me, aaaaaand, zilch for you." she shrugged. A twig crushed underfoot, her torso swayed with each step in a playful manner, a happy hum followed. Her winning streak an obvious highlight to her otherwise boring walk through the woods. **"You coming?"** she called behind her, Ethan remained at his last point of attack. His legs shook in place, sweat lined his brow, but none of their group were giving up their pace. With reluctance Ethan followed after them, his steps heavy. He didn't take long to reach Kimiko's side; she was lingering behind the others. A faint kindness she wouldn't admit.

Ethan could still feel that frustration, it tugged at his chest, buried deep in his thoughts, consuming everything else. Was he too early? Was it to do with the swing? The footing? The force? Was he just not doing enough, did he need more power. So many different questions kept taking over the last one. The only way to answer any of them was to try again. *Maybe the next attempt*- his knee buckled; his spiral forced to a halt as the limitations of his own body chose for him. His arms the only thing keeping him upright as the rest of him met uncomfortably with the dirt path.

His mind blanked, eyes staring only at the ground inches from his face, he could hear Kimiko's footsteps as they passed him. They kept the same pace, a sign to follow, or admit his defeat and ask for her help. Sweat fell to the floor, his cloak heavy, his fingers curled, crunching leaves in a tight grip. The tautness in his chest was growing, each frustration adding to a twisted ball of knots. Forcefully he got himself back onto his feet, he walked on after her, soon catching up once again. Her eyes glanced him over, swiftly returning to the path in front. She let out another yawn, stretching her arms out wide, they gently came down on exhale, stopping near her mouth. **"Oi! You two!"** Her volume shook the nearby flora, a bird flew

off in distress, Ethan nearly jumped out of his skin. The two up the front stopped, staring at her with bewilderment. She said nothing else, merely continuing to walk leisurely in their direction. As she reached them both she grinned **"I'm starving. We should eat"**

The forest opened up to a small clearing, a pond shimmered in the sunlight as it hung high overhead. Ferns lined its edge, beside a single tree. Large rocks poked through the thick grass, cluttered in heaps under the warm sun. Moss crawled within its shadows, where the light rarely touched. Kimiko sat with her legs outstretched. Bread in hand, this time cut in half with meat in the middle. Kaizen had sat nearby, their stuff piled beside him. He had enough food for three people settled in his lap, most of it consisted of fruit, settled atop was a matching sandwich, an identical one also in hand.

Ty barely stopped for breath as he devoured his lunch. His tail swished about wildly, the edge of it tapping against the rock he sat on. Its height easily dwarfs the others. **"Is this what it's like to fly, boss?"** He spoke with his mouth full, body swaying from side to side in a happy fashion.

Kaizen raised his head skyward, a smile on his face. **"Lemme see."** He scooped up his lunch, scrambling up the rock awkwardly with one arm. He and Ty took up a bit more than the surface space, leaving their legs dangling off the edge. **"Mm, not bad. Just imagine this but the wind is blowing really fast"** he took in a deep breath, his exhale was drastic, Ty was pushed without effort off the edge of the rock, caught only by Kaizen's quick reaction. His food however was not as lucky, falling to the floor below them both. **"Oops."** Kaizen sighed, hesitating to leave his new seat.

"This is fun." Ty hung from Kaizen's hand, still dangling with a smile on his face.

"Kimiko, can you throw my food back up?" Kaizen asked, carefully pulling Ty back onto a flat surface. She smiled at him, her body fell backwards against the rock she sat on, eyes closed. Happily enjoying the sun. **"...Never mind then."** He spotted Ethan sitting on the grass under the shade of the nearby trees, his food ignored entirely, a hand settled on his face, two fingers rubbed the bridge of his nose. **"HEY! Ethan!"** he called out a second time. **"Can you grab that for me?"**

Ethan lowered his hand, his eyes trailing their seats until it reached the source of the noise. Tiredly he stood, his hand firmly gripping the tree beside him as an aid. **"Coming"** his voice was quiet, steps wobbly, a strange fog clouded his mind, something he felt like he'd suffered before. His thoughts elsewhere, still going through all his failings, the timing was off, it had to be. He could hit still things, but moving ones was always a hassle, it was as though he was off by only a second each time. It infuriated him, the image of that single punch surpassing everything he'd worked so hard for.

As he stepped into the sun, his shoulders let off a faint blue steam. He needed at least this, just this before he went back. To defend himself, to change things. He felt his temperature rise as he trudged through the grass, overwhelmed by the intensity of the sun above. He reached the rock shortly, carefully scooping the various fruits that had dropped at its base. The sandwich threatened to fall from the top. He placed one foot on a small ledge, carefully raising himself up as he held his arm out.

I don't have time for this.

The next second was a blur, his body that felt so overly warm had suddenly frozen over. A wave of blue erupted into the air, his head hit the grass, vision blackened so swiftly he hadn't even noticed he had fallen. Pain riddled through his chest, a tightness so gripping he struggled to breathe.

The group sat in a circle, Ethan leaned against a tree in the shade, his cloak wrapped around him like a blanket. Kaizen was facing opposite him, a frustrated look of his own. **"You should've said something"** Kaizen sighed.

"...sorry." Ethan replied weakly.

"I'm not talking to you." He glanced Kimiko's way, she avoided his gaze, swiftly turning her back to the others. **"There's a town, maybe another day out from here. I'll carry you until it passes."** He put their belongings in their respective bags, though this time he divvied the chore up between the other two.

Ty sat at Ethan's side. **"It's okay, boss is super strong. Almost as strong as my legs"** an attempt to be reassuring.

"...yeah. I know." Ethan responded. **"It always ends up this way."** He let out a sigh, his chest pinched, catching his breath midway. A groan escaped in its stead.

"Are you okay? You kind of...like exploded." Ty asked.

"...yeah. It just... happens sometimes." As he spoke Kaizen knelt down beside him. Swiftly stopped by a hand near his face. **"It's okay. I can still walk. It's not as bad as it has been."**

The man stared at him, contemplating his answer for a brief moment. He put both hands on either side of him, lifting him back onto his feet gently. **"You sure?"** he asked, slowly releasing his grip as he received a nod. Ethan wobbled to begin with, but soon found his footing. The cloak still pulled around him. He walked slowly, body close to Kaizen as his friend periodically put an arm around him, stabilising his steps. Though he himself nearly fell twice in the brief walk from the tree to their present location.

Ty walked on Ethan's other side, a big grin on his face that was infectious. Ethan found himself comfortably distracted as they walked at his pace. **"It isn't normal to explode. Let me tell ya, I have a friend. She's dead. But she likes trying to explode stuff, normally me. I don't think I'd like being exploded."**

"Oh. I'm sorry." His smile dropped, meanwhile Ty's optimism hadn't changed in the slightest.

"Why?"

"Just ignore him." Kaizen piped up as Ethan's sympathy was slowly dwindling, transforming to a mass of confusion. His steps were still a bit haphazard, but he kept pace. **"We can slow down."**

"Nah it's okay. It'll pass." Ethan returned his attention to his feet, the voices either side of him drowning out his own thoughts. Though soon even that began tuning out. No matter how loud the sounds around him, a single phrase cut through it all. *Sorry kiddo.*

As the group continued their trek, Ethan improved slowly, the only hurdle being a single train of thought. Whenever that man's face crossed his mind, his emotions betrayed him physically, causing that tightness to return with a burning rage. With that in mind, he tried to keep his focus elsewhere, but it was easier said than done. Kaizen had taken the lead as he held on his own again. Kimiko had kept her distance, a usual habit whenever this kind of thing happened. Ty stayed by his side, happy enough to talk to someone closer to his own age.

"Boy, sis sure seems grumpy today." Ty spoke loud enough for all to hear. A glare coming his way from the person of topic.

"I didn't know she had a brother." Ethan responded, still perplexed that such a monster of a person could have familial ties of any kind.

"Haha, she always tells people we aren't family. She's a cool big sis; she wants to keep me a secret so no one can steal me as their brother instead." His chest puffed out, an overwhelming pride in his statement that anyone else could see right through.

"So, she bullies you too huh?" Ethan found himself chuckling, that tiny joy in finding he wasn't alone in dealing with her ire, or wacky schemes.

“What do you mean? She doesn’t bully me, we’re super close.” His fist closed; thumb outstretched. It collided with his torso. **“I’m a big man now, so I obviously can’t be bullied anymore.”** His tone was so genuine, a refreshing change. Ethan however could see himself in this young idiot, a person he used to be before he realized just how problematic she could be if he didn’t keep watch. His thoughts lingered on that familial tie for a moment, his thoughts going back to a place he didn’t want.

“Does it still hurt?” Ty asked, spotting another short burst of steam rise from his shoulders.

“Oh. Uh. Less. I guess.” He murmured. **“I’ve been like this my whole life. Sometimes this kind of thing just pops up out of nowhere.”** He raised a hand, watching as his fingers tinted blue.

“Does it hurt others? Like if I touched it?” Ty’s hand inched closer to a fresh wave of steam. Ethan flinched initially, he soon relented, the sparkle in this boy’s eyes so hard to say no to.

“Let me try to make something.” Ethan’s eyes closed, a string of blue rose from his palm, it twisted, expanding rapidly as it moulded into the shape of a butterfly. It fluttered between both boys before settling on Ty’s outstretched finger.

A look of sheer joy on his face. **“It’s warm.”** He tried to touch it with his other hand, his finger phasing through it as though it didn’t exist. **“Wow, it doesn’t feel like anything-”** the butterfly vanished in an instant, Ethan’s hand clutched his chest as his walking stopped entirely.

“Sorry... I don’t think I can make anything else for a bit.” He spoke through gritted teeth.

“That’s okay!” His smile was brighter, a genuine grin Ethan rarely saw when he used his ability in front of others. **“It was beautiful”** Ty said joyfully, a spring in his step. Ethan’s eyes widened. *Beautiful.* Has anyone ever actually called it that before? He took another step forward, the pain subsiding to a small dulled ache. A smile crept onto his face as he wandered after his new friend.

The hours passed by; The group’s direction changed every ten minutes with Kaizen in the lead. Each time he seemed sure of where to go next, he’d soon change his mind. This caused a noticeable friction between him and Kimiko, she tired of switching paths. **“Are you sure it’s this way?”** Kimiko asked smugly.

“I think so? I don’t normally walk this slow. It’s hard to tell. “

“So, we’re lost then? If only you listened to me earlier” her grin so condescending even Kaizen rolled his eyes.

“Yeah okay. I’m lost. Happy?”

She spun around, each step boasting further arrogance. The mounds of dirt and roots not even a thought as she effortlessly wandered backwards. **“Very”**

“I don’t mind you pointing stuff out, but you shouldn’t be taking that tone with me young lady” Kaizen growled, an unusual complaint as Kimiko narrowed her eyes.

“Oh? And what are you going to do about it, old man?” she snapped back.

The two began to bicker, each back and forth increasing in volume. Ty and Ethan walked behind, his health improved greatly over the past few hours, the pain nearly a mere memory, the blue glow had dimmed to nothing. Ethan lowered his speed a tad, content to get further out of earshot. **“Oh. This again.”** Ty raised his hands, swiftly covering his ears. Ethan raised an eyebrow. Surely, they couldn’t get even louder than this. **“You might wanna cover your ears. The ringing won’t stop otherwise.”** Ethan hesitantly raised his hands, proceeding to copy his companion. They both prepared themselves for the onslaught of unintelligible screaming.

“DON’T TELL ME WHAT TO DO YOU FOSSILIZED LIZARD!” Kimiko screamed loudly, her face inches from Kaizen’s. He barely moved, his brow furrowed, teeth bared.

“IF YOU LISTENED, YOU WOULDN’T GET INTO TROUBLE SO OFTEN!”

“WHO DO YOU THINK I LEARNED IT FROM!?”

The two screamed with an unmatched fury, they almost seemed like an angry parent and child. Both refusing to back down. Their conversation felt like pure gibberish at this rate, neither one saying actual words anymore, purely making different levels of yells in the other’s general direction. All until Kaizen let out a beastly roar. Birds flew from their nests, nearby critters scurried away in a hurry from the noise. Kimiko’s stance broke, stumbling backwards. His regret was near imminent. A hand swiftly reaching to help steady her but she batted him away, continuing their argument as though it never ceased. Ty frowned, his happy go lucky nature dimmed the longer the spat continued. He tugged his ears downwards, head lowered.

Ethan tried to ignore it, but they’d stopped walking. Their adventure at a standstill while the two battled like children. As he opened his mouth to help quell the situation, the ground shifted, a rumble among the dirt that the angry duo had yet to notice. Ethan inched closer to Ty, the boy still pretending the situation before them both didn’t exist.

“Uh... guys?” Ethan started, but their argument drowned out his voice. Rocks vibrating in place, anything small and loose appeared to be walking at a snail’s pace. **“Guys?”** Ethan raised his voice, still unable to match the other two. A scuttling noise battled the sounds of rage, a horrible shuffling Ethan couldn’t explain.

A pair of long claws crept out from the top of a nearby dirt hill, each the size of a small branch, attached to a head with no eyes. It slinked forward, crawling in their general direction, its body in segments, long spindly legs lined across it. The underside of this monstrosity was fleshy, while the top was covered in hollowed logs, moss coated the top. Ethan took a step back, he spotted another one, both stood about the size of a fallen tree, long, thin. Another followed the two. **“GUYS!”** Ethan yelled, the one closest to them turned in his direction, its pace increased, while the others headed for the screaming duo. It inched closer, blocking the path between him and his companions, Ty stood behind him his face contorted as he stared at this thing in front. His body shook quietly, the first time Ethan had ever seen such fear on this kid’s face. With an impending clash Ethan felt the panic set in, he grabbed Ty’s arm, pulling him backwards, running in the opposite direction. The bark encrusted insect followed suit. Their friends swiftly faded from view, blocked by trees, bushes and roots.

The two left behind had continued their quarrel, the sound not once letting up as the collection of insects piled up beside them. Claws raised to strike, the groan of wood shifting, they lifted themselves upwards, standing taller than their prey. A screech halted all arguments.

“SHUT THE HELL UP!” They both yelled in unison, Kaizen’s claws flexed as he tore through one, Kimiko’s knife through the other, the flesh ripped effortlessly. They both took a moment, their breath ragged, voice hoarse from the intense yelling.

“Stupid damn bug.” Kimiko snapped, kicking it as it hit the floor.

Kaizen took in a deep breath, his face scrunching as a putrid smell hit his nostrils. A trail of venom seeping into the dirt beneath the carcass. The tension passed, fading away to nothing, the two took a glance around spotting an empty trail, the other two nowhere to be seen. **“Uh... where are the boys?”** Kaizen asked.

“...Shit.” Kimiko grumbled.

Chapter 4

Ethan stumbled downhill, Ty in tow. The chitter of legs scrambling over the exposed roots. The end of the hill dropped abruptly, creating a ledge. The depth unknown, Ethan slid to a stop, Ty rolled off the edge. A swift thud followed as Ethan peered over. Ty lay on the packed dirt, a few twigs crushed beneath his frame as he sat himself up, he glanced up to Ethan with a big toothy grin. **"I'm-** "Ethan furiously waved his hands back and forth, his head violently shaking as he tried to get Ty to stop. With the threat of noise gone, he quickly glanced back, the danger out of view, Ethan cautiously lowered himself down. He lifted a finger to his lips, then lowered both hands as if to ask for a drop in volume. Ty mimicked him, an enthusiastic nod as he stood in silence.

The two listened for a moment. The forest near silent, the only remnant of sound being the breeze that shifted the canopy overhead. Everything else was eerily quiet. Ethan let out a near silent breath, the relief staining his face as he smiled. Ty's was unchanged, that grin so wide it seemed like he'd never seen anything dangerous in the first place. **"So now what?"** He said loudly.

Before Ethan could respond the sound returned, that horrible scuttle, countless legs all moving at once. His eyes scanned their surroundings, that noise came from everywhere yet nowhere. Its length made it hard to determine its exact location. Ty glimpsed it first, his mouth agape, he sat in silence. His words stuck in his throat, shaking in place. It slinked its way closer to them both, claws raised as it neared a target.

A whimper caught Ethan's attention, he turned to see claws swing downwards, Ty underneath it. His reaction time was faster, quickly grabbing Ty's arm he yanked him his way. The claws hit the dirt with a noticeable thud, they plinked off the surface as he slinked closer again. Ethan kept pulling Ty backwards, the boy not even moving anymore as indistinguishable words came out of his mouth.

As this creature wiggled closer, Ethan placed his hands in front, his usual attack stance. Everything played out like normal, the blue glow flickering across- His chest tightened, a scorching pain riddled through his upper body like a wave. The blue faded; his stance weakened before he'd even been able to move. The panic was setting in more than before. He couldn't attack. He didn't have his staff; it was with Kimiko. He couldn't hold his aura in shape, Ty was petrified by this thing, they didn't have their friends, they didn't even know if they noticed they were gone.

His breath quickened, the fear overpowering, yet a thought lingered in the air. *If it ended here... I wouldn't have to go back.* Something pushed against Ethan's leg, hauling him out of his own strange trance. His eyes fell to Ty, the boy was trembling, he was scared. The creature raised his claws again. *What am I supposed to do? I can't stop it. I don't know if I want to. What do I do? What do I do!?*

THUD!

A rock knocked the creature askew, its claws again hitting the ground, a slight graze across Ty's leg. Ethan panted, his breath heavy, hands dirtied. He dropped the rock he'd swung with, grabbing hold of Ty's arm again. **"Come on!"** He dragged him to his feet, forcing the two of them to run in whatever direction was away from this thing. He pushed the pain deep down, ignore it, leave it, deal with it later. They sprinted across the dirt, through the bushes, ferns, over the roots, jumping rocks. They didn't know which direction they came from; it didn't matter at the moment. They'd deal with it later. They just kept running, the sound of that thing scrambling after them. With each new obstacle cleared, their distance increased. Neither of them realized when it had gone quiet, they merely ran until they couldn't anymore. Ethan felt his leg buckle, his hand caught on top of one knee while the other touched the ground. Ty had more energy than him, still standing on both feet, barely out of breath. His jollier demeanour returned. **"Y-you...okay?"** Ethan huffed, struggling to maintain a normal breathing pattern.

"...yeah. You, aren't going to explode again...right?" he spoke with his head low, gaze elsewhere. His arms tucked in, hands gripping the top of his trousers in an anxious fashion.

“No. I’m okay.” Ethan tried to smile, a failed attempt as he was too tired to maintain it. **“Just...tired. We shouldn’t stop though. It might come back.”** He forced himself back onto his feet, hand firmly planted on his chest, he shuffled forward, his legs struggling to do as they were told.

Ty leaned against him, his arm lifted Ethan’s, held firmly over one shoulder. **“We can walk together. Like boss does when I’m tired.”** He gave a big smile, for the first time in a while Ethan felt his chest calm, that anxiety slowly fading to a dull thought in the back of his mind. **“So, what way do we go?”** Ty asked.

Ethan almost fell over. He had no idea. **“Uh.”** He found his own voice refusing to make recognisable words. **“...I don’t know.”** He relented; his head slumped downwards. He’d never hear the end of this.

The day dimmed, drawing a beautiful pink across the sky. The trees had thinned, leading to spots of open grass. The air chilled, a breeze so bitter it caused a shudder. Each step forward knocked a small glowing bug from its resting place. They floated skyward, bright orange tinting anything nearby. A pointed blue ear flicked as one landed on it, his eyes open wide, mouth agape, a smile so wide it couldn’t stretch any further. His tail swished about excitedly, arms outstretched, a skip in each step, a happy giggle anytime something brushed past his face.

Ethan stood in amazement, they were both tired, lost, hungry, scared, but this kid could smile on a dime. *This must be what it’s like to have a sibling.* He mused, slowly following the excitable oaf in front of him. He rested himself in the grass, immediately laying back, the dirt was soft, inviting. He let out a loud relaxed breath. Ty joined him, jumping onto the spot at his side, rolling onto the grass with a chuckle. The bag came off his shoulders, filled with mostly clothing.

Ethan pulled it close, sitting himself back up as he rummaged through it again. No crystal, no food. There was a coin pouch in here, but in a forest, it held little to no value. His hand brushed against something else, thin, flexible, glossy. He pulled it out cautiously, the darkness of night kept most of it hidden, but he knew what it was. He gripped it firmly, hand trembling while it scrunched at one edge.

“What’s that?” Ty asked. His head peered over Ethan’s shoulder.

“Oh. Uh. Nothing.” He looked away, hand stuffed back into the bag. He pushed it away from him with his foot. **“I guess we’re going to be out here for the night.”**

“I don’t mind. I used to do a lot of sleepouts with Boss.” Ty lay himself back down, arms settled behind his head.

Ethan shuddered as a breeze went by. He reluctantly pulled the bag back over, rummaging through it again. The picture he held moments prior tossed to the side while he dug through the few clothes they had in there. He stopped, eventually stumbling on an oversized shirt. His fingers wrapped around the clasp around his neck, with one click, the fabric fell to the ground. He stuffed the brooch into his pocket while Ty picked up the photo, glancing it over meanwhile Ethan seemingly messed about.

“Who is this?” he asked.

Ethan stopped, a quick glance over gave him pause. His hand raised, nearing the photo, but it struggled to continue forward, his hand fell back to his side. **“...a stranger”** he whispered, returning to his task.

“Why do you have a photo of them?”

Ethan’s chest stung, that wild ache that plagued him for the past few days roaring. He closed his eyes, hands still clutching the shirt he’d pulled from the bag, along with his cloak. He wanted to bury himself in it. **“I... don’t really want to talk about it.”**

Ty wiggled his feet, a vague flinch Ethan didn’t notice as a blade of grass brushed against one leg. **“Okay.”** He smiled, dropping it quickly, it caught his companion by surprise again.

“...just. Like that?” he responded.

“Like what?”

“I’m just. I guess I’m used to someone pressing me on it. You’re really fine just. Leaving it?” he pulled his knees to his chest, head perched atop while he stared in Ty’s direction.

“Yeah” Ethan blinked twice; this kid was such a strange creature. Another breeze rolled past them both, he shifted a little closer to Ty, one harsh flick and the cloak draped over the two of them. He put the shirt on top, a serviceable blanket for the evening. **“Thanks.”** Ty grinned. **“I can’t wait till we get to my house. I can show you all sorts of stuff.”**

“Your house- wait, you live with Kaizen?” Ethan rolled to his side, facing the boy.

Ty hadn’t moved, eyes skyward, the stars reflected so vividly in his gaze. **“Yeah! I live with Boss, dad, sometimes Kimiko, then we have my friend Kiz, and my sister Meeko normally lives there too.”**

“Kimiko’s and your dad lives with you?”

“Yeah! He’s really nice, he tells me to wear a sweater when it’s cold, and he makes me a drink when I’m thinking too much.”

“...that sounds nice.”

Ty rolled in Ethan’s direction, staring him in the face. **“It is! What about you? Who do you live with?”** he patiently waited for an answer, his tail making a loud rustling sound under the cloak.

Ethan lowered his head. **“My aunt, I guess. She used to come and read me stories when she wasn’t busy. Otherwise, it was mostly just me and...my grandparents.”**

“Oh, that’s cool. What’re they like?”

“...they’re...okay.”

“I’m excited to show you my friend, and Tama, we can play games and hang out, and eat some nice food” Ty’s arms flew upwards in excitement, his legs outstretched. Ethan smiled, the ache lightening.

“That’d be nice. I don’t know how long I can stay.”

“We’ll just play as many games as possible while you’re there. Lots and lots of games. I can show you the cool ball I have.” Ty continued to wiggle about, his leg shuffling about under the cloak. He began scratching one of them, flinching shortly after.

“You, okay?” Ethan asked quietly.

“Yeah, my leg feels kinda tingly. I probably just need a nap. We walked a lot”

Ethan shrugged, **“Maybe it fell asleep? Either way, tomorrow morning, we can try to hunt something before we keep going.”**

Ty squirmed about a little more, curling his legs up to his stomach, arms folded under his head while still on his side. His tail slinked up into his hands. He looked quite content as he closed his eyes. **“Hey Ethan.”**

“Yeah?”

“Let’s see who can fall asleep fastest!” he grinned.

Ethan raised an eyebrow, a strange request. **“Sure?”** he said quietly. Within seconds Ty’s head went limp, mouth open wide, a loud snore came from him. Ethan chortled, desperately he tried not to burst out laughing. What a weird kid. He shuffled a bit in his own spot, getting comfortable before closing his eyes. His chest calm despite so many worrying thoughts lingering in his mind. Maybe things wouldn’t be so bad for a little while. Until they found their friends, he had another excuse to just keep travelling.

Footsteps roared through the forest, sliding down dirt hills, crunching leaves, whizzing past branches. It all a mere obstacle as a figure tore through the bush. **“TY!? ETHAN!?”** A woman’s voice shrill, worried. She paused for a moment, awaiting a response that never came. Her fist clenched, foot stomped hard on the ground, all light of day had gone, the only thing that remained was a heavy darkness.

“Any luck?” A voice came from the bag at her hip. Hesitantly she took out the crystal from it, her hand gripping it tight.

“No.” her tone admitting defeat. **“You?”** The only response she got felt like static; he was avoiding the question. She sighed, frustrated at their present situation. **“I haven’t seen any tracks this way, and now it’s too dark for me to see properly.”**

“What’s the tallest landmark around you right now?” Kaizen asked.

She took a quick glance around, trees covered most of her vision, the odd rock taking up space around them, she settled on a rockface, leading upwards. Vines and leaves covered the bottom not massively far from her. **“There’s a cliff edge to my left, it goes up pretty high, there’s some rocks clustered near the edge of it.”**

“I’ll be there in a sec”

With that, she put the crystal away. She walked up to the cliff edge, her body spun on the spot, back leaned against it. She folded her arms, closed her eyes, waiting. It didn’t take long, a loud *bwoom* went off in the distance, followed by a *whoosh*. A loud crash came after. Kaizen rolled across the ground at the top of the cliff. Dirt chunks flew overhead. Head poked over the edge, his breathing uneven, tired. **“Down here!”** He turned in her direction, he barely moved, letting his body fall from the cliff edge to the ground below. Two large white wings with a hint of gold, torn at the edge, spread wide as he gained too much speed. They slowed him down immensely, though he swiftly tucked them back in. He landed with a thud, still panting heavily. His hand against the cliff’s edge. Scales lined his arms, claws in place of fingers. Parts of his face shimmering in gold; his human appearance waning. His teeth were jagged, large spikes lined his back. **“You should probably take a break.”** Kimiko said quietly.

“...Soon. I can still check out that way.” He took a step forward, hands flexed.

“Not soon, idiot. You’re no good to either of them if you collapse midway.” She moved from her spot, stomping over to him with a scowl. **“Sit. Down. Don’t make me call Tama.”** Kaizen flinched; this tall man shrunk in place. **“We can’t find anything in the dark, you’re tired. I’m tired, and Ethan is with him. They’ll be okay for the night.”**

“...Ethan isn’t holding up either. His aura went wild hours ago. What if-” Kimiko’s hand covered his mouth.

“Shut up. They’ll be okay. As soon as it’s light I’ll wake you up, and we’ll find them. I’ll message one of my contacts to help look while we’re resting, okay?” She raised an eyebrow, waiting for a positive response before letting him go. He relented; his body relaxed, eyes struggling to stay open. The only thing keeping him awake at this point was the fear of losing both kids.

“Let’s find you a proper spot to sleep in. There was a big open space over that way.” Kimiko wrapped her arm around his, leading him forward, he followed in silence.

The night dragged on; the two boys lay quietly under their blanket. One slept soundly, while the other tossed and turned, *fault*. It echoed, anytime it was silent that word lingered. He'd heard it before, but a fresh reminder stirred him from sleep. He sat upright, arms shaking, a glow emanated from his shoulders. He briefly turned to Ty, worried he'd woken him, the boy lay sleeping, unbothered. Gently he moved himself from under the cloak, instead covering up Ty who shivered periodically. His eyes stopped on Ty's foot that'd managed to escape the warmth of the cloak. It looked strange, but without a proper light he was unable to see it properly. ...*You got this. Just for a little bit, it should be okay.*

He held his hand upright, his eyes fixated on it. A mist of blue began seeping from his palm, spiralling into the shape of a tiny glowing ball. It held its shape better than before, the sting in his chest only minor. With a better light source, he held it close to Ty's leg, the first thing he noticed was a tear in the pants. Not thick but it was there. A spec of blood coated its edge.

Ethan pulled the pant leg up, uncovering a small cut down one leg. His eyes widened, the wound was surrounded by a darker colour, it looked inflamed, weeping. Slowly spreading to the entirety of his foot. When that thing attacked them earlier, he must have gotten hit by it. It was venomous. He moved back over to Ty's head, carefully placing his hand on his forehead. He was burning up.

"...oh no."

The day came swiftly. Kimiko and Kaizen had resumed their search at dawn, scouring the forest floor in a panic. Kaizen launched himself off the tops of trees, the force so grand many snapped at the top. Kimiko ran across the bottom, searching for anything of use. She'd found various animal tracks, a pair of two sets gave her hope. One looked human, adult, the other was clearly not, almost animal like in nature. With a hint of frustration, she continued on her way. If they couldn't find anything after today, they aimed to go toward town, with any luck Ethan would have led them in a similar direction.

The sound of a stream joined the lively forest, birds chirped, creatures scurried across the dirt. Thick trees towered overhead. Ty sat by the water; body wrapped in a black cloak. He shivered quietly, skin pale, leg wrapped in a torn shirt. Despite it all, he had a tired smile on his face. Their canteen in hand, thankfully one of the few items they still had in the bag. He took a swig, ears perked as rocks shifted nearby. Ethan came into view, a hare in hand. He grinned widely, quickly running over while also holding an arm full of small branches to start a fire. They'd made good distance; Ethan had kept moving the moment he noticed the wound. It'd been cleaned and wrapped the best he could, he found water to leave Ty at while he hunted breakfast. Without a weapon he'd made use of the rope in their bag, creating a snare. Now only one problem remained, how was he supposed to prepare it?

"How're you feeling?" Ethan asked, he set everything nearby, starting a small fire. Beside Ty on the rock was a noticeable pile of mushrooms, berries and a few pieces of fruit.

"Cold, and my leg hurts. But I'm okay! When we find boss, he'll know what to do!" he began sliding off the rock, settling himself down near the fire. His eyes closed, the warmth a nice distraction as sweat fell down his forehead.

"Once we've had something to eat, I'll keep moving. We'll do our best to get to a town or something so we can get that looked at." Ethan skewered a couple of mushrooms, placing it near the fire while he dug through their bag. They didn't have a knife, not even close. He tapped his finger on top of the leather, lost in thought. His finger sparked blue every few taps. They could carry this with them for a day, if they found something sharp maybe they could use it later. Though he had no idea how well that'd go. He glanced back over to Ty, the boy beginning to drift off while sitting upright.

The mushrooms and berries he had were decent while they travelled but neither had eaten anything since midday yesterday, he needed something more filling. He glanced around them, looking for a rock with a

sharp edge. It didn't take long to find a small chunk of white quartzite. Part of it broken among the rocks beside it. Leaving a moderately sharp edge. He put his hands around it, the piece way too big to use as a tool. He eyed the rocks beside it. Quietly, he chipped the quartz by hitting it with a controlled force, parts flew off, the odd one being sharp. He picked up his favourite, ditching everything else.

He rubbed the edge across his finger, careful not to cut it. With that, he began preparing their catch, he washed the newfound blade before attempting to skin his prey, the resistance was heavy, not sharp enough for what he needed in parts while others it was barely adequate. What he wouldn't give for a real knife. As he struggled to cut through the hide, a thought sprang to mind, he needed a sharper edge at the top, it also didn't curve the way he needed. He hesitated, he couldn't just stop here, or things would spoil. With a bit of effort, the edge of the blade shone blue, extending out just enough where the rock chipped, creating a more precise edge.

The blue didn't stay for every cut, only appearing when the stone couldn't do the work. This kept him relatively calm, his chest stinging only slightly. It gave him a new sense of control he hadn't previously had with this strange ability of his. He finished preparing his catch as if he'd done it plenty of times prior. He set the pelt to dry, proud as he glanced over to his companion, fast asleep.

A few hours passed before Ethan headed off once again, the hare had been cooked, Ty carried piggyback, all their belongings were draped over Ethan in one way or another. He'd used one of his other shirts to hold their forageables. Their cooked food was pulled into smaller pieces, eaten at their leisure while they continued onwards. Ty now awake would shove one or two pieces in Ethan's mouth, while slowly eating his own share. **"How'd you learn to do this stuff?"** Ty asked, his mouth full.

"Kimiko and Kaizen thought it was important for me to learn. I guess they were right." He smiled, each step just another task as they continued to look for a path. **"I've had a good amount of practice, since I'm the only one cooking."**

Ty was happy, enjoying his meal while being bundled up like a child, in the distance a loud strange sound went off, the third or fourth they'd heard so far. Ethan adjusted his course anytime he heard it, unsure of what it was. **"I'm gonna learn it too one day. Men learn it right? How to hunt and stuff?"**

"I guess? I don't think it matters unless you're travelling a lot. I didn't think I'd ever need to hunt, I didn't even eat cooked food until the last coming of Losar."

"What!? What about a hot drink?" he leaned his head closer to Ethan's, legs outstretched. He flinched, realising he's not supposed to be moving one of them.

"...People drink boiled water?"

"No! You can make milk hot, and then you put chocolate in it. It's SO good. I'll ask Tama to make you one, you'll love it. We can have that, and we'll have cupcakes, cause Tama makes the best cupcakes."

Ethan chuckled a little, he found himself readjusting the boy as he wiggled around. He tossed him upwards a little, to properly get his arms in a better position. **"That sounds nice."** He smiled, looking forward.

"Yeah, it'll be super cool. We can have a hot drink, then we can play with the ball I have, then you can teach me how to hunt in the forest." Ty talked without breath; his enthusiasm still as infectious as ever. One could barely tell he was ill with how frequently he squirmed about. The idea of spending time around Ty wasn't a bad one, it could be another excuse to stay out a bit *longer*, right? Even if it was the last thing he did, at least it'd be kind of fun. He was so wrapped up in his own thoughts he'd forgotten to verbally respond. Walking in silence along the dirt, avoiding anything he might trip on. **"Hey...Ethan?"** Ty asked, settling into a more relaxed state. **"I'm glad we met."** He mumbled, his head resting against Ethan's back. The older boy smiled

“...Same.”

The duo trudged forward, slowly the once sparse trees grew plentiful. Vines hung from the treetops, bushes, roots and other flora took over any empty space on the ground. The canopy overhead created a barrier between night and day. Eyes peered at them from the shadows, creatures growls seemingly following every step taken. Ty had only worsened, now sleeping with heavy breath. Ethan trekked forward regardless, doing all possible to avoid any outside problems. His chest calm, the pain he'd had for days subsided, his anxiety however was brimming. He was focused so clearly on just one task that nothing else mattered. He stopped only once to refill their water.

Ethan wandered toward any source of light, desperate to get them to a safer, warmer location. The more trees there were, the less chance of a town, they were currently just heading further and further from help. As he headed uphill, something ran a chill down his spine. He was being watched, more intently than before. There was more than one. Those growls had increased, a pack of something lingering not far behind them both. He picked up the pace, using most of his strength to quickly get back to some kind of flat land. As he reached the top, his heart sank, a slew of bipedal creatures scattered the forest floor. They stood up to Ethan's waist, their skulls exterior, black, ribs and spine outward, their flesh rotting, the smell abhorrent, enough to make Ethan wretch. Exposed muscle barely hanging onto bone.

His eyes scanned the path, anywhere safe he could run. His footsteps were slow, cautious not to show his back, guttural growls stalked his every move, flesh fell to the floor as they trailed after him. He could see four, but he could feel more nearby. His fingers lit up, body wary, he tried to inch further from them, each step he took, another followed. The side stepping reached a natural end as he found a flatter piece of land, he began walking backwards, the creatures stalking his every move. This stalemate wouldn't last forever, he had to do something or they were going to be lunch.

He felt a lump form in his throat, breath quickened, heart pounding, one hand flexed, the other desperately keeping Ty upright. *It's now, or never.* His arm stretched downward, eyes closed pressure built up in his palm, the pack sprinted the second his gaze left theirs. Their teeth bared, distance closed within seconds, the smell intensified. Three more scurried from the hill, chasing their friends.

By the roots, I hope this works.

Ethan's palm shone brightly, a flash of blue so blinding it filled every nook and cranny in their area. The creatures were halted abruptly, an ungodly squeal from each one. As the light dimmed Ethan's eyes opened, he spun around, back to the beasts, fatigue was no contest for the adrenaline that consumed him. He ran at a speed he didn't think possible while carrying another person, with one hand still free, he pulled the remainder of the meat from their bag, tossing it away from them both in hopes it'd cause another diversion. He passed a set of footprints, his own splashing through a chunk of mud as the ground became wet, uneven. That horrible guttural snarl returned behind them, less than prior, two stranglers had gone after their food, the others sought a much larger game.

Ethan felt his legs burn, the weight of their stuff along with Ty was too much. He pulled the bag off first, thrown, it hit one in the skull, knocking it prone. Their forageables were next, thrown in a random direction, he felt lighter, not by a lot but anything was fine. The hunt continued, they inched closer with each step, Ethan unable to maintain a steady distance. He passed an overhang, two sides of thick dirt funnelling him in one direction. Each creature behind him forced to run in pairs. His hand flexed blue again, eyes closed, another flash of blue lit up every aspect of their present location. The moment the pressure stopped Ethan opened his eyes again. Their snarls diminished, this tactic could at least let him gain distance, but each time he did it, his speed decreased. His chest was beginning to burn, legs struggling to maintain any sense of speed. He couldn't stop. Not until they found light, or help.

A flurry of steps shot forth from his left, his throat dry, breath quick, panic at its peak, he could see one still running, the overhang it's only escape from the light. It launched in their direction, Ethan unable to react, was knocked off his feet. He rolled across the ground, back hitting the other side wall, Ty rolled a bit

further, still clinging to the cloak he was wrapped in, unresponsive. Ethan's side ached, the creature had tumbled with them, landing between. Without thinking Ethan pulled his hands apart, that pole-like shape spiralling from nothing, he had no hesitation, striking the beast with a fury, knocking it away. The weapon vanished, he scrambled closer to his friend leaving only the glowing palm. As he looked back, the creature dared not to move closer, it sat at the light's edge, pacing. He put his other hand out, lighting it too.

It didn't take long before the blue dimmed, Ethan's arms were struggling, all muscle response was dwindling quickly, his hands kept lowering. The light still burned, but its reach was becoming smaller.

The creatures' companions had caught up, they too only kept to the edge of the light. Ethan shuffled further back, one hand failing to keep light anymore. He tried to push Ty, but his strength too, failed him. His lower side felt wet, sticky, hot, he dared not to look at it. The last glimmer of light was starting to go, he only had one other idea. It was a long shot, he didn't even know if his arms would listen to him anymore. He forced both hands in front, eyes closed, teeth clenched, arms tense, a pressure built up from his chest, trailing down through his limbs, his muscles felt like fire, burning intensely as his hands radiated energy. With one swift flex of his fingers, that pressure released, light exploded through every crack, crevasse, it spilled out past the trees, a beacon so bright Ethan hoped someone, anyone would see it. **"HEEEELLPPP!"** He bellowed; voice carried along the light. With that his body went limp, his mind still conscious, but nothing wanted to move. He fell over Ty, hoping at least he could try to protect him in some way.

A single blue butterfly rested on his shoulder. Growls loudened. A rustle came from behind, the bushes containing something larger.

Kaizen tore through the bush, slicing anything in his path, he'd heard something, there was noise this way. He'd found a campfire back further; they had to be here! He flew into the open, breath quick, eyes wide, in front of him was...

A single deer. Standing in the cold darkness of the forest. His heart broke, body crumbling to his knees, his fist hit the floor. **"DAMN IT!"** The deer vanished swiftly; birds flew from their nests.

"Still nothing huh?" Kimiko's voice came from his pocket.

He slumped back, arms resting in front. Something deep down in his gut told him something was wrong. He knew they'd come this way, but not where they went after. For all he knew he'd gone in the wrong direction. The trees were so thick he couldn't see anything from overhead, forced to search on foot. His head lowered, legs raised to his chest, quietly he took the crystal from his pocket. **"...yeah."** He whimpered.

"Their camp wasn't far from town. Should we try there next?"

"If you head to town, I'll keep trying around the forest." He picked himself back up, head hung low, eyes at his feet. Ty's image in mind.

"We'll find them Kaizen. They'll be okay."

"...Yeah. I just." he paused, fist clenched, the crystal cracked at one edge. **"No, you're right. Thinking about anything else isn't going to help anyone."** He lightened his grip, placing the object back in his pocket. Legs bent, wings out, he launched himself through the trees.

It hurts.

The creatures had yet to move, halted by a single butterfly. He didn't remember making it, or even maintaining it. It shifted anytime something neared it, forcefully covering them with its light. He found it almost laughable. All that trouble, all that energy he spent, and all it took was this. This was enough. His side had been hurting more, he'd cut it on something, probably not deep, but enough to make it uncomfortable, a lingering thought among everything else.

The rustle had continued, coming and going in their general direction. Ethan couldn't make out what it was, his vision was limited to the direction his head lay in. Until he had more energy he couldn't move. His heart hadn't stopped pounding, he was merely waiting for their demise at this point, it hadn't been long, only minutes, but each second passed felt like a lifetime. Another tried to move closer, warding off by the butterfly. This time another moved the other way; they were getting smarter. One would pull the light away, while another loomed overhead. Drool began to drip over Ethan's chest. His eyes closed, heartbeat so loud it drowned out everything else.

The prolonged wait was horrid, the panic creeping higher the longer he waited. A muffled sound kept going off in the background, undistinguishable. A pressure rested against Ethan's arm, it tightened, painfully dragging him upright. He flinched, unwilling to open his eyes again. A grunt broke the deafening rhythm of his own heartbeat, it sounded almost like an animal, he was lowered, his feet touching the ground. It held him there until he gained enough strength to stand. He opened his eyes in their direction, a hooded figure carefully lifted Ty up under one arm. He began walking without a word. **"Wait-"** Ethan stumbled after him, legs wobbly, he tripped mid step. Mounds of flesh lined their path, the remains of what once chased them only moments ago. Blood drained from his face, the mangled bodies that littered the floor catching his breath. The tall male stopped, he loomed over Ethan, nose flared. fur covered most of his body, long robes lined his torso a gap in the middle, he wore baggy pants with detailed embroidery lining most of the cloth. A wrap around his waist tying it all together.

He grunted again, hand firmly grabbing hold of Ethan's shirt. The boy felt the world disappear from under his feet, thrown upwards in a manner he didn't expect. As he fell down a strong arm curled around his waist. **"Ugh!"** his body tensed, side stringing more than before. He had no energy to refuse, merely hanging as they began walking off. His eyes struggled to stay open, soon succumbing to a rest he so sorely needed.

A pressure lingered on his side, a singular voice not far off. **"Hold him firmly"**. One eye cracked open, the last light of day hanging overhead. Two silhouettes covered part of it. He blinked once, about to open his mouth when something dug into his side. His body tensed; mouth clenched. Whoever was there was now aware he had woken. **"Ethan, calm down."** He halted at his name, the voice still a mystery as his brain focused on the pain. Two hands held him down, unable to move. **"Just about got it."** The voice continued, he could feel a twist, then... nothing. His muscles relented, breath short, trying to regain some composure, the sound of a small, wet stick hit the ground. **"You can release him."** The voice spoke once again. As all the pressure lifted, he caught his breath, rolling onto a side that didn't ache. One arm rested underneath him, holding his weight. Wait. *Where's Ty?* He shot upright.

"Ty-" he stopped, spotting him laying a short distance away. He was wrapped up in a thick blanket, leg bound, his skin retaining actual colour.

"He should be fine after some rest."

The voice came from his right, something clicked, he knew that voice. He turned to face him, a skinny male knelt beside him, hair jet black, matching eyes, pale complexion, a turtle neck covering his chest underneath a thick dark purple coat. He looked relatively tall, but extremely fragile. **"Vin."** Ethan's mouth hung agape. Someone he knew, staring back at him with a smile.

"You're lucky. Cade here spotted-"

Ethan threw his arms around Vin's shoulders, pulling him in tightly. The man while bewildered hesitantly put a hand on the boy's back, assisting him in sitting upright, along with returning some level of affection. Ethan's eyes stung, his body quivered, the pain a mere hindrance as he clung to this man firmly, head buried in his shoulder, desperately trying not to cry. **"I need to dress your wound."**

Ethan shook his head lightly. **"Just a bit longer"** his voice shaky. His grip only grew tighter, a wave of blue floating off him while he squeezed his eyes tight.

Vin relented, hugging him back **"Okay."**

"I can understand your...stress. That is a number of problems all at once. I'm sorry about our misunderstanding a while back. I didn't intend on adding to that stress." Vin sat opposite Ethan, both huddled next to a warm campfire. **"...I'm pleased you're okay."**

Ethan gave a swift smile before returning to a more sombre mood. The beast man sat cross-legged beside Ty who had cuddled up to his tail. While he sat stone faced, he had a happy air about him. The night was warmer than before, crickets had returned their harmonious hum, wind had all but died down. Ethan's waist was bandaged, a small wound but he'd managed to snap a twig off in it initially. He'd dug out a spare shirt from their belongings. **"...I'm not sure what to do now. Finding him was-"** he clenched his fists, lips pursed. **"...it'd fix things."**

"I see. I suppose you will be heading home?"

Ethan flinched at the word home. His hand rubbed against his arm, head down. **"I don't know."** He began rocking in place, that frustration building again, his shoulders burning blue. **"If I go back that's it."**

Vin watched Ethan intently, his eyes lingering on that blue steam. **"Well, assuming your friends find you once we get to town. Did you have plans with them?"**

"...Kaizen told me I could stay at their place for a little bit. After that...I don't know."

He gave a smile, it felt hollow, misguided, yet still somehow it calmed the boy. **"I'll be bold and say if all you need is an excuse. Laz's invitation is still valid. The grumpy old codger could use something to brighten his day. He still talks about you often."**

Ethan's eyes widened. Mind filled with the image of a wooden desk, floor cluttered in useless things, seated at it was a gruff man with a thick grey beard, red cap, oil-stained clothes. He could hear his voice, a swear word tucked into every sentence without remorse. That name gave such a strong feeling of nostalgia. An excuse to travel a bit longer. A warm smile crept on his face, genuine. **"Mm. I miss him."**

"I'll be returning soon. If you want, you can walk with me. Otherwise, I hope we can meet in the city should that come to pass."

Ethan's head shot up, the smile widened **"I-"** he paused, eyes drifted toward Ty who lingered in the background. He toiled with the idea of being selfish, unable to commit despite his own desire. He shrunk back in place, head lowered once more. **"I'll think about it."**

"As you should. All good decisions are ones you ponder on. As a smart young man, I hope you don't make rash decisions"

Ethan chuckled, **"Yeah I know."** His fidgeting stopped, arms relaxed, breath the same. He took in the night air, enjoying a calm moment.

Vin scooted closer, unusual for him. He leaned forward. **"With that out of the way, I'm eager to hear about the other things you've come across since our last encounter."**

Ethan looked confused at first, as if he'd never been asked. He studied Vin's demeanour, trying to understand if he heard things wrong, but to his amazement this man seemed genuinely interested. **"I gotta tell you about this then"** his dreary mood utterly destroyed. Hand wrapped around the red pendant hanging around his neck. Happy, vibrant, the steam vanished quicker than it came. They talked for hours, long into the night, the campfire had long since gone out, Ty somehow had climbed out from under the blanket, instead hugging both his own tail and the beast man's. He mumbled in his sleep, quite content. As morning broke, the group began to move. The two bookworms hadn't slept a wink, still chatting among themselves while Ty was carried under one arm by Vin's companion. Another loud sound went off in the distance, something Vin paid close attention to.

"I admit, I think Laz would be proud of your recklessness. Considering he often taught it."

"Haha. I bet. I got pushed into a few of those things. Kimiko just kind of...does stuff, and I get pulled along for the ride." Ethan scrunched his nose, a hint of annoyance that lightened soon after. Imagining her stupid face through all the things they'd done together. **"It can be fun sometimes though. I can't tell her that, but I'm glad we patched things up."**

"I second that. I don't have to fear for your safety. Well... as often."

"You always turn up when I need you though. Like today. Or with that shadow thing."

"Mm. The coincidences are very strange. This time you have Cade to thank. His ears are sharp." While they spoke, his eyes glanced Ethan's wound, his tone shifted. Cold, he had to catch himself as his smile wavered. **"Town isn't far, we'll drop you off at the main road. Once you meet with your friends you can inform me of your decision."**

"Yeah. I'll keep this safe then." Ethan waved a small orange crystal fragment in his fingers before tossing it into his pocket. A faint clink of as it collided with his ring.

"...Ethan?" Ty's voice called from behind. He squirmed within Cade's grip, confused but unalarmed. **"Oh. Hi! I'm Ty. What's your name?"** he asked, hand outstretched for a handshake. He was given another grunt, this only made Ty more excited. **"OOOH! I can do that too!"** he stretched out both arms, flexing his admittedly scrawny muscles. His lower jaw outstretched, he grunted twice. Cade was startled, he stopped walking for a brief moment, lips curled to a grin, a hearty laugh overtook him. His scary demeanour all but vanished while the two wagged their tails. The pair at the front, stumped at the exchange.

Ethan wandered over, careful not to bend too often as they walked. **"Hey"**

"Hi! This is my new friend! He grunts." he excitedly points to Cade, currently stifling chuckles.

"That's Cade"

"Oh. Nice to meet you Cade! Your laugh is great. I can laugh too but I feel sick. I'll show you my laugh later." He held himself up in a proud manner.

"Ethan. Could I pick your brain for a moment." Vin's voice came from the front, he eyed the trio, a cold stare, Cade swiftly stopped laughing, he readjusted Ty, lifting him onto his shoulder.

"I'll be back in a minute" Ethan turned back to his friend, leaving Ty further behind.

The younger boy watched as Ethan ran back up to a man he didn't know. He felt a shiver go down his spine. **"Who's that?"** He directed his question at Cade, who grunted in response. Ty scrunched up his face. **"I see..."** he placed a finger on his chin, eyes narrowed. He looked normal enough. Kind of lanky, unthreatening, yet Ty didn't like him at all. Something felt so off about him. Anytime it seemed like Ethan would return to say something, the man would speak, distracting him again. It didn't take long before Ethan had gotten so engrossed in conversation he'd forgotten to return.

"You see them?" The orange crystal shone brightly, lightly held in one hand, a gold ring gently tapping its surface.

"...no." She let her body fall against a nearby wall. Arms folded, the crystal poked out on one side. She stared at her feet; the stone paths a nice change from the amount of dirt they'd travelled recently. The buildings surrounding her were tall, thick concrete mixed with wooden beams, the occasional stone wall separated buildings. Humans littered the streets, every so often one would see a tail, long ears, fur. An elf caught her attention, that symbol seen all the way back in Nova proudly displayed on their chest.

She lingered in the shade, the silence at the other end starting to worry her. **"Kaizen?"** she asked. She could hear fidgeting. **"It'll be fine. It's not the first time either of them have been left on their own."** she pushed off from the wall, walking through the street. She passed a few carts, travellers coming and going. All heading through the entrance, a large curved gate that sat open throughout the day. **"I'm going to walk along the path leading out, we can meet up at the forest edge"** she paused.

Staring out the gates, a large group was walking into town, a mix of adventurers, merchants, among the lot were two boys. She began moving forward, her pace steadily increasing as she ran into the crowd. Ty noticed her first, his hand raising, other hanging over Ethan's shoulder. **"Oh, hey big si-"** she almost knocked him off his feet, arms wrapping around him tightly. Ethan left to the side.

"You're okay" she whispered. A loud sound went off in the distance once again. The crowd noticed, along with Ethan, many turning to its direction. Kimiko ignored it, nearly squishing her brother. She squeezed him even tighter. **"Why the hell did you wander off?"** she growled.

"Ow ow ow." Ty began flailing his arm. Ethan took a step back. **"I'm sorry!"** he spat out, trying to scramble out of her grasp.

The people near them had continued on their way, leaving the trio standing in the open path. **"Careful with him"** Ethan said quietly, his interference made him her new target. She glared at him, releasing Ty to gravity's whims.

A sinister grin on her face as she launched herself at Ethan. For once, he was quicker, swiftly ducking, running to the other side of Ty. He faltered a moment, his side aching as he hid behind the younger boy. **"Don't think you can hide from me!"** A loud crash came from behind her, part of the ground cratered, dirt flew high into the air clouding the party.

The two boys had fallen over, Kimiko remained unphased. Ty became excited, swiftly scrambling back onto his feet. Ethan took a second longer, struggling to stand at first. A figure burst from the dust cloud, grabbing Ty in a tight hug. **"Boss!"**

Kaizen was in human form, almost cradling Ty in both arms. **"You had me worried."** He spoke through muffled words.

Ethan's confusion slowly melted, replaced by a twinge of jealousy. He tried to ignore it, glancing off in another direction. **"I'm okay, see I'm super cool and stuff, so obviously I wasn't in any real trouble-"**

"What happened?" Ty got cut off the moment Kaizen spotted the bandage on his leg. He was lifted swiftly off his feet.

"Oh, that bug thing got me. It's okay though, I'm all better now!" As he spoke, Ethan felt a wave of anger directed his way, brief. His gaze hesitantly shifted in its direction. He'd never seen Kaizen look at him that way, pure blame. He turned away, shrinking in his place. That pain in his chest returned, he stuffed a hand in his pocket, fingers curling around the crystal shard he was gifted. **"Boss?"** Ty asked, noticing a tension. Kaizen realized his mistake, his expression softened, grip slowly releasing the boy.

He opened his mouth to speak, but was stopped as Ethan gave a strained smile. **"It's fine."** He said quietly, before walking forward. Kimiko flashed Kaizen a glare. She swiftly chased after the boy, lingering at his side with a stupid grin on her face, any attempt to lighten the mood. With their party in motion, Ty seemed content to follow, something Kaizen quickly took charge of, picking him up. He jogged back up to the other two, Ty hanging off his shoulders.

The street was empty, the odd straggler roaming to more populated areas, sun high overhead, still air. Ethan settled on the edge of a stone wall; his toes barely touched the floor. Moss crept up the back, ivy consuming all nearby rock, he revelled in a brief moment of respite. He took in a breath, deep, filling his lungs, a slow exhale. He ignored the wound, focusing on anything else that calmed his mind. He was okay, he had to be. All he had to do was keep his power in check. He readjusted his cloak, the hood down while he enjoyed the sun. The quiet didn't last long, the laughs of Ty heading his way, along with Kimiko on some form of tirade. They stopped short of him, pursuing some kind of discussion. Ethan looked toward a nearby flowerbed, expecting a long wait as his thoughts began to wander. Someone chose to sit beside him, the rustle of paper in hand. He took a peek, unsure how to feel as Kaizen smiled back at him. He held out a skewer wrapped in a thin brown paper. Meat stacked between various vegetables. Juices collected in the paper, threatening to break through it.

Ethan took it tentatively, deciding to eat with small nibbles.

"Sorry." Kaizen said quietly.

Ethan shrugged, **"It's fine."** He took another small bite, eyes elsewhere.

"It's not. I didn't mean to-"

"It's okay. I get it. You were worried about him." Ethan said quietly, he stopped eating. Uncomfortable, he rested the skewer back in the paper, arms still.

"I don't know what words to use." Kaizen complained, his hands sliding down his face. He took a moment, slapping his own cheeks with his palms before staring directly at Ethan. **"I am stupid."** He said bluntly. This gave Ethan pause, a small part of him knew Kimiko would agree with that statement. **"I mean it when I say it wasn't meant to be directed at you. None of what happened was your fault."** The two stared at each other for a short time, the silence deafening. **"...Are you okay?"** he asked. Watching Ethan's face waver. He tensed, looking away again. Kaizen sighed, inching closer. **"I'm sorry. I should have asked earlier"** He spoke softly. Arm outstretched, an open invitation for a hug. Ethan felt that heat in the back of his throat, brows furrowed, lip quivered, vision blurred, tears stained the edge of his face. He desperately tried to hold it back, but as Kaizen wrapped one arm around him he gave in. He wept in silence, head buried while Kaizen's hand rubbed his back. His frame a shield to the outsiders who occasionally wandered by.

They sat that way for a while, Ethan's food had long gone cold, something he didn't mind. He nibbled away at it once more as he sniffled in his seat. Eyes red, Kaizen sat beside him in silence, eating his own food. He spit fire on it, the edges swiftly charred before consuming a whole skewer in one bite. With less tension between them, Ethan pondered the earlier events, wanting anything to distract him from his own concerns. **"You're... human right?"** he asked quietly.

Kaizen was in the middle of devouring another skewer, it was like he was stuck in a photo, so still as he blinked at Ethan. **"Wait, you thought I was human this whole time?"** he asked.

"I mean... what else could you be?"

A loud laugh came between them, Kaizen bent over gripping his sides. **"Really? Kimiko never said anything?"** he asked between chuckles. Kimiko peered over at them from her seat. This confused Ethan even further.

“No?”

His body rippled, scales seeping across his skin in a wave, two horns grew on the top of his head one broken half way. Wings sprouted from his back, ripping the shirt he presently wore. He didn't even wait for a response before throwing the contents of another skewer in his mouth. Ethan sat in silence; jaw dropped. **“I'm a dragon.”** Kaizen said nonchalantly.

“YOU'RE A WHAT!?” Ethan yelled.

Kimiko returned to what she was doing, now that she understood the theme of the conversation. **“Yeah. I thought you knew.”** Kaizen spoke between chews.

“...I had no idea. She doesn't really talk about you.”

Kaizen almost fell off the stone wall. **“Ouch.”** He groaned. **“Then she probably didn't mention that she's my daughter.”**

A potato fell from Ethan's mouth. He sat there in silence, mind in circles. Kaizen laughed again. **“She's your WHAT!?”** Ethan yelled again, Kimiko glared daggers at them both, Ethan flinched only now realising his own volume. **“Sorry. That just. Caught me off guard.”**

“Haha, it's fine.” Kaizen ate the last of his food, a record time even for him. He sat there licking his fingers.

“Ty told me he lived with both you and his dad.”

“Hm? Oh, that'd be Tama. He's a close friend. When I bought three kids home, he just kinda started parenting them with me.” He looked toward the sky, nostalgia in his tone. A smile on his face. **“I met Ty when he was so tiny. Didn't really speak, didn't smile. His mother didn't want him. No idea what happened with his father. I guess I just fret about him a bit more than I do with the other two. This isn't an excuse by the way, I can't justify what I did.”**

“No, I get it. When it was just the two of us, I was more stressed about looking after him.” Ethan fidgeted with his food, half the skewer still on the stick, rolling it in his fingers. **“I've never really had to look after someone before. Not until Kimiko kept being careless. But Ty was even more work.”**

“He is right? Anytime he's doing anything on his own I worry he'll be kidnapped or something. He's so trusting of everyone.”

Ethan leaned backwards, his hands taking more motion while he spoke **“He is! I thought I was bad. He made friends with a guy who only grunts.”** A piece of meat flung from the stick, landing on the floor between them.

“HAHA! Yep, that's Ty. C'mon I'll grab you another skewer. You look like you haven't eaten a lot.” He slid off the wall. As he turned back to Ethan, he spotted another elf, dressed in robes, a familiar symbol of a tree with an insect proudly displayed.

“...to be honest I'm more tired than anything.” Before Ethan could even move, Kaizen pulled the hood over his head, his features returned human, standing in front of the boy in an almost protective manner.

Kimiko had noticed as well, swiftly dragging Ty over. **“What's going on?”** Ty asked.

“Nothing.” Kimiko started. She grabbed hold of Ethan's wrist, pulling him off the wall. **“It's about time we headed off.”** He winced, something no one noticed, unable to stop himself from following along as she briskly began walking off in another direction. The other two trailing behind, Ty was picked up again, his hobbling more noticeable when at a faster pace.

A partially drawn curtain obscured the quiet street beside them. Kimiko watched it carefully, eyes darting to any sign of movement. The room was small, two beds squashed together, enough leg room to walk around them. Ty lay on one bed, tucked in tight, already fast asleep. He seemed to still be getting over everything. Ethan and Kaizen both seated on the other. **"We good?"**

"Looks like it." Kimiko responded, quietly returning to the group. She plopped down between both beds, taking up a good amount of space.

"We shouldn't stick around too long." Ethan found himself fidgeting again. The other two seemingly made plans without his input. They were right though, that made it all the more irritating. Ty shifted in his sleep, a minor whimper as a bead of sweat rolled down his face. **"He's not right yet. I'm tempted to take him back to Tama, but if I did you two would be on your own for a bit. I don't know if that's the smartest idea right now"** Kaizen said quietly.

"We've spent longer time apart. We'll be fine, right bud?" She nudged Ethan's arm. He nodded briefly.

"Hm. It'll take me a couple of days to make the full trip. Where should we meet up?"

"Doesn't matter, we both have a way of communicating, so just do your thing and you can call me when you're back this way."

"True." Kaizen tapped a finger on his chin, pondering their events. He climbed off the bed, walking around to Ty's side, he carefully picked him up, blanket included. **"Just stay out of trouble. I mean it Kimiko."**

"Yeah yeah, I know. I'll be on my best behaviour." She threw her hands up, despite her protest, neither of her companions believed her. She'd cause trouble one way or another. Kaizen headed for the door, he stopped before leaving, turning back to Ethan, he gave a gentle smile, that guilt still hiding in his eyes. Ethan mimicked him, with that he made his way out the door. Leaving the old duo back on their own. It was almost calming having Kimiko there, no one else. Ethan let himself flop onto the bed, exhausted. He hadn't slept in two days. Kimiko returned the sentiment, having done the same. **"I'm beat."** He murmured.

"Same." Kimiko yawned. She stretched herself out, tail curled, feet hanging off the edge. She kicked off her boots with some difficulty, refusing to move her arms while she lay there. Ethan had already removed his shoes; his cloak lay on the floor.

"...It's only midday." Ethan groaned.

"Right. Perfect time for a nap."

She didn't care, soon drifting off on her own. Ethan followed suit, the exhaustion catching up with him in one big wave. The bed was comfortable, soft, inviting, it didn't take long before he too fell asleep.

A sharp sting woke Ethan a few hours later, groggily he opened his eyes, Kimiko hovering over him. **"Kimiko?"** he groaned. **"What're you doing?"** His waist tautened; a fresh bandage pulled tight.

"You should've told me you were injured dummy." She grumbled.

Ethan sat himself up, fingers rubbing his eyes while a yawn escaped. **"Sorry."** He blinked a few times, upper body resting all his weight against one arm. Kimiko pulled a bag between them, a waft of something delicious grabbing his attention. She plonked it on his lap.

“I got you something to eat before everything closed.”

The bag crinkled, his hand running through it. The first thing he smelt was cheese, a warm steam set his mind at ease. **“Thanks.”** He smiled, pulling out a hot potato wrapped in a simple cloth. Melted cheese covered one half.

She slid the canteen over, picking up her share from the same bag. **“Heh, just this once. Next time I’m going to rub it in your face for a week.”** She sneered.

Chapter 5

A warmth stirred him, the morning sun peeking through the curtains in a polite manner. The room was still, bed comfortable, a light breeze came through the open window. He rolled over, hand brushing against the pillow, face buried in it. Fatigue lingered, begging for sleep. He happily gave in, wishing the silence could continue. For once his thoughts were pleasant, the relaxed conversation before bed a nice one to end the day on. It didn’t take much to drift off. The door cracked open, thick black boots sneaking along the floorboards. A blue tail playfully swishing back and forth, a large grin, teeth visible. Eyes narrowed on her prey. He had no reaction, his breaths quiet, steady, smiling. She almost felt bad, almost. With one swift move, she threw herself on the bed. **“It’s MORNIN!”** she cheered.

He groaned, body aching, skin almost leapt off his body. Heart in his throat. He turned toward her, her face inches from his. **“...Why?”** he complained. One hand landed on her shoulder, pushing her away. He glared in her general direction, all the while she laughed loudly.

“Your face is priceless.” She sneered, climbing off him. He took this opportunity to tug the blanket over his head. Returning to a blissful darkness. **“C’mon you little dweeb, we’ve got some sightseeing to do before we head off.”** He didn’t respond, curling up. Her face dropped, smile turned scowl, she leaned forward, both hands grabbing large chunks of the sheet. With one swift twist she pulled it from him. He groaned louder; head buried in the pillow. **“You’re bleeding again.”**

“Yeah? Whose fault is that?” he ignored the pain, so long as he didn’t move it disappeared not long after.

“Just get up. Oh, and put your necklace away.”

The pair wandered along the stone path, Ethan’s hood back atop his head, necklace stuffed in his pocket with everything else. His brows furrowed, lip turned upwards, dissatisfaction clear. He glared at his travel partner while she blissfully enjoyed the warm sun. **“We have to pick up some stuff before we leave, so might as well make a day out of it.”**

His side ached, redressed but sorer than when he initially got it. She was a bigger threat than anything else. They passed an open window, a waft of eggs sizzling over a hot stove. Ethan could feel his mouth salivate; his grumpy demeanour replaced with desire for another hot meal. **“In that case can we get something to eat first?”** He asked, watching as the general public began leaving their homes to start their day.

“Sure.”

He stuck by Kimiko, spotting the odd elf walking around. He tentatively adjusted his hood. Despite looking as though she didn't care, Kimiko wove them through an occasional side street, lingering in an alley for a few moments before happily parading out the other side. They stopped at a few places, picking up dried meat, berries, fruits, a far cry from Ethan's hot meal, but a meal all the same. He ate without complaint, happy to be walking on even ground. Their stuff left in their room, an easy spot to return to should the excitement of the day prove too much. This unfortunately gave Kimiko reason to dump all their new belongings on Ethan's shoulders. It didn't take long before he was carrying half a dozen different things. Their coin purse lightening with each new stop. Yet somehow gaining weight at others.

She'd picked up yet another bag, filled with medical supplies, an extra knife, a small notepad, charcoal and whatever other extras that wouldn't fit in their other bags. This one was also thrown over Ethan's shoulder. He began straggling behind, the load only getting heavier. **"Wow, you're so slow today"** she complained.

His breath exhaled, long, deep. Back resting against a stone chair, he slid down, legs outstretched, bags at his feet. The relief immense. Kimiko plonked herself down beside him, head in her hands, elbows touching her knees, she stared at him with a smirk. He could feel her eyes on him, annoyed. **"What?"** he asked.

"Hmm." She narrowed her eyes, making him more uncomfortable.

"Seriously what is it?" He asked again.

"I'd tell you, but..." She looked away, a snicker as she looked off into the distance. Ethan rolled his eyes; she was baiting him. He ignored her, sinking further. She seemed fine with this, instead relaxing beside him. **"I kind of missed this."** She spoke so quietly, Ethan could barely hear. He smiled briefly. **"It's nice to just...do nothing."**

"You know what. You're right." She sank a little, one leg pulled upward to her chest, arms wrapped around it, head rested on her knee. The quiet air of town calming. **"I feel like I haven't relaxed in a while."**

"Relaaaax, enjoy life." Ethan chuckled;

She hit him playfully in the arm while joining, sharing a laugh. **"That's my line. You clearly don't know how to relax. Look at you"** He leaned forward, body hunched.

"You're right. Probably cause I'm stuck with you."

She waved a finger close to his face. **"When did you learn to be so cheeky?"** her attempt at a scowl destroyed by an unwanted grin.

"Dunno. Your fault though."

"...True. You used to be so...polite. Glad we got that sorted." She gazed skyward, clouds slowly moved across the sky. Various shapes and sizes, darker tones of grey peering at the edge. A nice breeze starting up alongside it all.

“Heh. I will probably need to fix that soon.” His voice wavered, smile fading, the mood dropped. His hands rubbing against his knees, leg bouncing lightly. **“Kimiko. What happens after we get to Kaizen's place?”** he asked.

“What do you mean?”

His grip strengthened, fingers shaking. **“After we've been there. Seen people, relaxed. Whatever we're doing. What happens when it's all done.”** His anxiety sat on full display. Kimiko wasn't having it, her arm curled around his shoulder, pulling him into a type of headlock.

“Idiot, we'll do what we always do. We'll wing it.” She winked. She held him there a few minutes before letting go.

His grip waned; **“Of course.”** He shouldn't have expected anything else. It never really felt like Kimiko had planned anything out.

He lowered his head, hands clasped together. **“I found him.”** His tone apathetic. **“I don't know if I'll still be travelling afterwards. I don't really have an excuse anymore.”**

“So?”

He did a double take, confused as she seemingly didn't care. **“What do you mean so?”**

She gave him her full attention, hand close to her chest. Smile on her face. **“Exactly what I said. Who gives a shit if you don't have a reason. Never stopped me.”**

“...I wish I could be like that.” He stared at the floor, hands tightened further. A pit in his stomach. Everything fell apart as a hand hit him in the back of the head. Knocking him forward. His feet caught him before he fell off.

“Look, we got a whole day in town. You can be dreary later, let's drop this stuff off and go look around.”

With the day slowly fading away, Kimiko did what she does best, drag Ethan anywhere that took her fancy. They lay in a bed of flowers, got chased by a group of burly men who'd noticed their stolen wallets. Ate at the skewer place, grabbed an ice-cream. She chased a pigeon who'd dare to walk too close. Ethan got his own fair share of interests indulged in as he forced her into a book store, then walked through a few open buildings with beautiful architecture. They mimicked a town he'd been in not long ago, their windows stained like the night sky. He admired the carvings in stone and wood, everything so intricate, depicting long extending roots along its surface, all leading to the shape of a large tree. A fun amalgamation of things he'd seen and something new. With his interest in a few different buildings, Kimiko had taken it upon herself to climb to the roof of the tallest one, a task she'd forced upon Ethan as well. They sat at the very top, legs hanging over the side of dark green tiles, the edge of the building covered in a beautiful metal vine.

They stared down at the town below. A site rarely seen by others, though a tad scary for Ethan's tastes. The clouds were darker, a storm looming, the wind a chill. They sat in silence for a time, Ethan eagerly

watched the people below, taking in the detail put into parts of this town. He'd brought the notepad they'd purchased with him, sketching the odd thing that piqued interest.

Kimiko observed him quietly, an old habit she'd missed. He was talented, each line precise. It felt like they'd sat there for hours, time moving at a snail's pace. The light dimmed, blanketed in grey. **"All relaxed now?"** she asked.

Ethan stopped sketching, he stared at his paper a moment, then the view. Lastly, he looked toward Kimiko, a big smile on his face. **"Yeah. It feels like the good ole days."**

She lurched forward, a forced stop before tumbling off the edge, both hands holding the tiles. **"Hah! You sound like an old man. It hasn't been that long."** She gave an obnoxious laugh.

"Yeah. I guess the last few days just made me appreciate this kind of quiet a bit more. Even though you lost our stuff, and almost got me killed, then started an argument that got me and Ty lost in the forest"

"Heh. Yeah, it's been fun." She gave a smug look; no doubt she'd do it again.

A rain drop hit Ethan's paper, bleeding lines on part of his sketch. Another followed, he tucked the paper into his pocket beneath his cloak, an anxiety returning as more rain began to fall. **"Guess that's our cue to go back inside"** she said quietly. She took in a moment first, eyes closed, the cool rain trickling down her skin. Ethan had already started his descent. Swiftly ducking under an archway. It wasn't long before Kimiko appeared beside him. As they made their way down the street, they passed another elf, then another. They were increasing, all wearing the same robes as before.

They made their way toward the inn, forced to hide multiple times as the rain trickled in, not yet heavy. Ethan spotted another one, this time his gaze lingered, the symbol on their chest was different, the tree design a birch, while the insect in its centre looked like a grasshopper. The ones prior were all of an oak tree alongside a butterfly. He tore his gaze elsewhere as Kimiko dragged him along. They made it back in one piece, half soaked as the rain picked up. Neither one seen, they enjoyed the safety of a closed room. **"I'm gonna go see if they have somewhere to dry this off. I'll be back in a bit."** She waved her hand, closing the door behind her.

Ethan removed the cloak, his shoes, swapped out his clothes to dry ones before dropping on the bed. He leaned over the edge, hand stuffed in his trousers pocket on the floor, taking out the paper from earlier. His fingers grazed the shard, a quick reminder he needed to talk to Vin now that he had the chance. Throwing everything else on the bed, he began rummaging through their bags, looking for the crystal they had earlier. Once found he pulled out the tiny shard in its centre, replacing it with his own one. He snapped the bottom metal upwards, a quiet sizzle as the orange lit up. **"Vin?"** Ethan asked.

As if eagerly waiting the call, a response came immediately. **"Ethan! I was beginning to wonder when I'd get your call. Did you find your friends alright?"**

"I did. Thanks to you and Cade." Ethan's other hand began fidgeting with the edge of the paper. **"Uh. I hope it's okay, but I think I'm going to go to Kaizen's place for a bit. I'll try to go to Lumire after, if they let me. I'm not entirely sure how that'll go."** He held his breath, eyes closed, head lowered, awaiting a reply he knew wouldn't be ideal.

"I thought as much. You've done well coming to a clear decision."

Ethan's forehead hit the comfort of the bed, body hunched, the sting on his side cutting through the guilt.
"...Sorry."

"Why are you apologising? It's a logical choice. Are you still in town by chance?"

Ethan perked up, rolling over. Eyes staring at the crystal in hand. **"Yeah, we leave tomorrow."**

"I'm also wandering around. We may bump into each other before we both journey off."

He shot back upright. **"That'd be great-"** a set of angry footsteps trailed the door, **"Oh. Sorry, Kimiko is back. I gotta go. But we'll talk again soon."**

"Of course. Anytime." The metal piece tugged downward; light dimmed. Ethan picked the shard out of its middle, replacing it with the original. He threw it back in the bag as Kimiko opened the door. **"Apparently they don't have anywhere to dry things, so we'll just have to toss it out the window when it stops raining."** She groaned, she plonked herself on the bed, legs crossed.

"I mean, it's not the first time we've had to take wet clothes with us."

"Yeah, but it's annoying. I'm half tempted to just leave it here."

Ethan rolled toward the pillow, cradling it in his arms, face stuffed in it, drowning out her complaints. He could still hear a gentle pitter of the rain against the window, his heart ached, but with it being behind a closed window, it wasn't as bad. Kimiko lay down not far from him, arms outstretched, one hitting Ethan in the back. She let out a loud audible sigh.

"I'm bored" she groaned.

Ethan rolled his eyes. Of course she was. Her arm hit him again, the other smacking the soft blanket. **"What do you want to do then?"** he grumbled, forcefully sitting up to escape her bored wrath.

"Hm... Good question. We can't go outside, we can't fight in here, we don't have any toys or anything. I don't have a good-looking man in here to have fun with. I am stumped."

Ethan glared at her. He turned himself around, facing her. Legs crossed; arms folded. **"Ew. Look if you're that bored, we could just talk for a while."**

"I guess? I don't know you can be kinda dull." She rolled over, her hip hitting his knee. Face away from him.

"Ugh. And you're annoying. There's lots of stuff we can talk about, like for example why you didn't tell me anything about Kaizen. We've been travelling for ages and I had no idea."

Kimiko scowled, she too shot up from her spot, seated opposite him. **"Look, I just forgot, okay?"** she grumbled. She mimicked his pose; arms tucked in tight. **"I assumed you knew, he's clearly not human."**

"...Kimiko, I didn't even know Dragons were still around. It makes a lot of sense with context, but he didn't transform even once while we were travelling, not in front of me."

“Yeah yeah, my bad. Next, you’ll be on my ass for not saying anything about my family situation.”

“No... that one I get.” Ethan sunk a bit, arms falling into his lap.

She unfurled her own, a softer expression on her face. **“You haven’t talked about your family, besides your dad.”** She said quietly.

“...I don’t get the luxury. If they found out I said anything, I’d get in more trouble than I’m in already.”

“Pfft, like it could be worse than running away from home.” She watched Ethan sink further, he looked away from her, fingers interwoven, knuckles white. He tensed his shoulders, palms a pale blue. He looked uncomfortable. **“Wait, seriously?”**

His face contorted, unsure how to answer. She leaned herself back, legs outstretched again. One ended up in his lap, the other to his side. Her upper body held up by both arms. **“Geez. I thought my situation was weird.”** She leaned her head back, staring at the ceiling. **“Kaizen picked me up when I was little. I can’t remember how old. He’s not my dad; I don’t really see him that way. Ty is definitely like a little brother. We’re not related at all, but when you’re around someone enough, sometimes it just kinda sticks.”**

She smiled, glancing back at her companion. He’d stopped fidgeting, he faced her without strain. **“So, anything you *can* tell me about your family?”** she asked.

“Hm... honestly. I guess after what happened with my dad. I don’t really want to talk about it. The best person I can remember being part of my life wasn’t even related. He was this old guy who owned a shop, he just...let me watch him work. It was nice. I felt safe there. Then, because of my-” Ethan paused, fear stricken as he almost said something he shouldn’t. **“Never mind.”** His shoulders slumped; head drooped. The mood followed suit.

Kimiko shuffled forward, he recoiled as she got a tad too close, without saying a word, she smacked him hard on the back. **“You’re too damned dreary”** She grumbled. Her hand slid up his back to his face, his cheek squashed between her thumb and index finger. She pulled it hard. He tried to swat her away, only resulting in an even harsher pinch. **“You can’t escape until you smile.”** She growled. Ethan relented, his teeth showing in a horribly awkward grin. **“Much better”** she sneered, releasing him. He rubbed his cheek, glaring all the while. **“Haha. You look hilarious.”** She rolled over, back against the headboard, now sitting beside him. **“I didn’t get to say it earlier, but thanks for looking after my idiot brother.”**

“To be honest, if we took away the giant bug, and the...other scary stuff, it was kind of fun.”

“What else did you guys come across?”

“Some weird dog things? They were rotting. Chased us for a while. OH” Ethan’s enthusiasm brimmed, his hands in front of him as he spoke. He clapped both hands together, his palms lighting up a vibrant blue, he slowly tore them apart, the shape of a pole appeared between them. He gripped it in one hand, it spun, lightly tapping Kimiko on the shoulder.

She blinked twice, staring in disbelief before that massive grin appeared. **“You finally got it!”** she cheered, tackling him hard enough for both of them to fall off the bed.

“OW!” Ethan winced; the reminder of his own wounds very apparent.

“Oops. Sorry.”

With the day gone, the rain settled in, beating louder outside. The streets emptied, darkness of night making a near pitch black atmosphere. Ethan lay under the blankets, exhausted. He curled up with his pillow, happy to sleep it away. A half-eaten sandwich sitting on a tiny bedside table. Wound redressed yet again. Kimiko sat by the window, a strange paranoia had been nagging at her for an hour or two, she'd found nothing, but something felt off.

Her ear flinched, noise. Talking, but she couldn't make out what they were saying. She crept across the room, hands to the wall, ear facing the door. The talking continued, she made out a rough word, not one she could speak. She inched back to the bed. Lightly shaking Ethan. He stirred a little, soon falling back asleep. She shook him more intensely; her other hand covered his mouth. He tried to speak, but was unable as he tiredly opened his eyes.

“Ethan, get up. Grab your shoes.” She whispered, she released him, climbing back off the bed, quietly opening the window to their room, rain poured in with the wind. With a clear escape route, she picked up two of their bags, leaving some of the other things behind. Ethan sat himself up, wearily slipping his shoes on, barely conscious as he swayed. Once dressed, the talking got louder, a knock on the door. His initial reaction was to answer it, tiredly wandering in its direction. Kimiko swiftly put an end to that, grabbing him by the scuff of the neck, pulling him backwards. **“Idiot, don't do that.”**

“...What's going on?” he asked, she didn't give an explanation, only pushing him toward the window.

“Don't talk, just move.” She nearly threw him out, he stumbled outside, falling on his face, hair drenched by a pool of rain water. She followed after, hauling him to his feet as their door opened. A few elves walked in. She pushed him back down, crawling underneath the windowsill.

The loud rain plagued his mind, eyes unfocused, chest burning, a discomfort that took precedence over their situation. **“Hurry up damn it. Do you want to go back home?!”** her words snapped him out of it, swiftly picking up the pace.

He glanced behind them, spotting a robed elf sticking their head out the window. His blood went cold, **“How'd they find us?”** he asked.

“I don't know!? Just move it” She turned a corner.

They came to an alley, stopped abruptly as three figures stood in front, blocking their exit. Ethan's eyes widened, fixated on the person in the middle. **“Master Wisp.”** A woman's voice cut through the rain, stern, her face covered by a hood, proudly presenting the symbol on her chest. Most of her skin was covered, anything showing was pale, her hair white, braided. She was tidy, an air of nobility radiated from her.

” Master?” Kimiko asked, glancing back at Ethan. He was shaking, hand gripping his chest, eyes wide.

“We've been looking everywhere for you.” The woman continued.

“Well, have fun doing it a bit longer.” Kimiko grabbed Ethan’s wrist, she pulled him the way they came, continuing down a different street. That too however was blocked, another standing in the narrow passageway. The ones following originally had cut off their exit. Leaving them trapped on every side. Ethan’s breath quickened, hyper ventilating as someone came up behind them both. **“Ethan. Light everything up”** Kimiko said, pulling him forward a little.

“I-I” he stammered.

“Don’t let go of my hand and just do it!”

Ethan closed his eyes, palms burning bright, he took in a deep breath, a brush of blue seeping along his hair as it began lifting skyward. Everything lit up a blinding blue, it flooded every crack, through the side streets, over the rooftops. Kimiko pulled him forward. She didn’t stop as they reached the blindsided person in front, she knocked them over with one swift kick to the head. They collided with the wall. She hauled Ethan onto a main road, the rain drowning out most other sounds. **“We’re out of here. We can find somewhere dry later.”** She called back.

Ethan nodded, everything overwhelming him as he could hear his last name called behind them. *I don’t want to hear it.* They sped down the road, bags jostling on Kimiko’s side, the rain drenching everything, footsteps through puddles, people running behind them. Another appeared in front, Kimiko prepared to take care of it, but Ethan refused to let go of her hand. Instead squeezing tighter. She hesitated. The figure’s arm raised, book in hand, speaking a tongue Ethan barely understood, his body froze, stopping them both, heart in his throat. The ground rumbled beneath their feet. The path cracked; it lifted at the edge. He yanked her arm back; she collided with his torso as a stone pillar spiralled where she once stood.

Kimiko stared in disbelief, unsure how to react as Ethan scooted back a few steps, allowing her space to move. The rock in front of them began to twist, more cracks appearing at its base. Ethan gripped her hand tightly, running in the opposite direction. **“What the hell was that!?”** she yelled.

“A mage.” Ethan spat out, dragging her now as he ran toward any other street. Another figure caught his eye, they were coming from almost every angle, a horde larger than either one of them had dealt with prior.

“They didn’t have a mage last time!” Kimiko yelled.

“I don’t think they expected me to have gotten away like we did.” He felt his chest pound, that ache festering. His aura bubbled, palms alight. The ground crackled under their feet, stone shifting out of place, as the mage’s words echoed through the street. Each strike aimed at Kimiko, something he noticed fast as he pulled her closer each time. The town entrance came into view, freedom.

They pushed forward, his face colliding with an invisible force, he recoiled backwards. Kimiko came tumbling after. She was the first on her feet; hands settled on a see-through wall. **“What the hell...?”** she muttered.

Ethan slowly stood himself up, his side stinging. One hand settled on it, a warm sticky texture seeping through his clothing. His eyes widened, a sinking pit in his stomach as he grabbed Kimiko’s wrist once again. **“We need to move!”** He tugged her the way they came-

Smack!

They crashed into another wall. A few feet from the other one. Ethan lost his footing, landing on the ground, while Kimiko smacked her fists against it. **"No... no no no."** His hands curved around his ears, through his hair. Eyes darting in every direction, as figures walked into view. Two mages knelt on the floor, hands downward maintaining the barrier.

"What is this?" Kimiko asked. A group of twelve total walked toward them, their faces all covered by thick hoods, holes cut at the sides for their long-pointed ears. Lengthy white hair, peeking out from the fabric. Rain pooled at the edges of this invisible wall, a strange ripple effect glossing over its surface. Kimiko paid close attention, watching as it bounced off the top.

"Please. Master Wisp. Have you not been playing a little too long? It is time to return." The woman in the centre of the group raised both hands, a sign of peace. She seemingly eyed Kimiko's position, visibly angry the moment she inched toward her master.

Ethan could feel his world spin, sweat poured down his face, hand gripping his chest as the panic set in. **"Ethan?"** He snapped back, Kimiko's hand lightly touching his shoulder. His eyes trailed it to her unworried face. She smiled, something he couldn't understand nor justify, it irked him. They were trapped, done for, all this was over.

"Whoever gets to the top first wins, right?" she sneered.

Ethan's eyes widened, he watched as she put one foot against the barrier, she tested the distance between the two, spanning a similar length to a typical alleyway. She then walked toward the wall at its edge. With that, she used one wall as a jumping point, kicking off the other. She seemed to enjoy herself while wall jumping to the top. Ethan forced himself to his feet, his breathing slowed, a small sense of control back in his hand as he chased after her.

He didn't hesitate, mimicking her first movement, his side stung, catching him off guard, he tumbled momentarily, a swift blue panel catching his back. One appeared under his loose foot, creating a new point to climb up after her. She clambered on top of the roof, leaving Ethan enough space to follow. His foot collided with the barrier for one last hit, it vanished, the magic dispersing in one lacklustre moment. He closed his eyes, arm outstretched. Prepared to fall should it come to it.

A firm hand gripped his, another followed, she pulled with all her strength. Both tumbling over one another, landing on a flat stone rooftop. A wave of relief swept Ethan, hands at his sides. He could feel a battle between hot and cold, the rain's might over-powering his adrenaline. Kimiko took little time for rest, she sat herself up, breath heavy as she leaned over her partner in crime. **"You okay?"** she asked.

"Y-yeah." He winced as he attempted to sit up, one hand swiftly covering his side. **"Ugn. It stings a bit, but I can deal with it."** He said quietly, her expression became sterner.

She stood herself up, holding a hand out. He took it, thankful for the assistance. **"Can you jump between buildings?"** she asked, wandering toward the edge. She gauged the distance, spotting an elf on the ground below them.

"Uh. It might be a struggle."

"We need to get out of the rain, if we climb down, they'll spot us, so we only really have one option." She began tapping her foot. **"Unless. I jump across and try to get their attention; you might be able to slip by unnoticed. Any building here should be fine for shelter."**

“...They won’t chase you. They only want-” as he spoke, Kimiko tore the cloak from him. Wrapping it around herself. She put the hood up, smirking as she struck a pose, the wet fabric clung to her arms and back.

” How do I look?” she grinned. Ethan smiled tiredly, she picked up their stuff, taking the load before putting a foot on the edge. **“Meet me at the skewer place at sunrise. Okay?”** she waited for an affirming nod, once given she took one large leap. She didn’t even stumble as she reached the next rooftop, she ran along its edge, immediately grabbing the attention of the group below. They swiftly began following after her.

“...Thanks.” Ethan whispered, he glanced down, the street below now empty.

He carefully began making his way down, the odd blue platform settling under his feet to help alleviate the strain on his waist. The last small jump created a small splash, a beautiful sound as he knew he was now on solid ground. He returned his hand to his side, head starting to feel strangely light. Small drops of red trailed behind him, diluted by rain. He turned a corner; the sight of an elf caused his heart back into his throat. He ducked back in the direction he came, a wave of blue shot from his shoulders. Footsteps echoed through the rain. Ethan flinched, his back against the wall, he slid backwards, using the wall to keep balance.

“Master wisp” A voice came from in front. An elf staring him down, their hood pulled back, revealing loose white hair, cool light skin, beautifully bright green eyes, they bowed their head. Ethan attempted to ignore them, still inching away. His eyes spotted their crest, a grasshopper in its centre.

“...Y-you aren’t supposed to be here.” Ethan snapped. **“This is a...** “he paused, fists clenched. He lowered his gaze a moment, a frustration building up as he struggled to say the word. **“A family matter. Other families aren’t supposed to interfere.”**

“My apologies. My master caught wind of your location. We were assigned to assist these...knights, as they had been unable to locate you themselves.”

Caught wind of my location? How? Ethan glared at him, his thoughts jumbling periodically due to a headache. **“By law, you can’t touch me.”** He took another step back; the elf took one forward. **“Normally that would be true, but the council has given permission given your...situation.”** He offered his hand, extending it toward the boy. **“Please make this easy for the both of us. You need medical attention, please step forward”**

Ethan took a step forward, a shiver shot down his spine, his eyes grazed the figure, spotting a book at their hip. This was a spell. He took another step back, regaining the distance between them, more alert than before, a fear now plaguing every part of him. He needed to tune him out, but his voice carried over the rain.

“Please. Do not fret, you are safe. All you have to do, is stand still.” Their voice was low, sickeningly sweet, something about it commanded attention, respect, Ethan’s body fell in line, his feet now in place, unwilling to move despite his protest. His heartbeat intensified, aura flowing off him in a steady stream. *I can’t move. I’m stuck; I’m done. It’s over. I can’t do anything; they’ll take me back.* His mind raced, the sound of the rain had all but disappeared while it still fell around them, all he could hear was those footsteps, one after the other as their distance closed. *Move. Please move. Run, do something, anything.* He watched in horror as this elf closed the distance, a fake smile plastered on their face, they reached

their hand out, gripping his shoulder firmly. **“Let us meet up with the others.”** He said coldly. **“Follow me-”**

PLINK!

A chunk of metal hit him in the side of the head, a human woman hung half outside her window, arm outstretched, thick black hair over one shoulder in a loose braid. **“Leave that kid alone!”** she bellowed, hand on hip. Ethan felt his foot free, he tore away from him, ignoring any pain as he shot down the street. The woman closed her window, running to the door of her house as Ethan passed it. **“Wait!”** he ignored her, happy for her assistance, but fearing for her own wellbeing should he stay. He ran further down the street, he spotted some crates, barrels, boxes all stacked up beside a store, without halting he ducked behind the lot of it, wedging himself in the cracks. His chest heaving, side aching, he could hear something running past, unsure if it was his pursuer or someone else.

He closed his eyes tight, head low, arms wrapped around his waist, pressure applied to his wound while also providing some level of comfort, a cloth overhung the crates, a brief respite from the rain. Fabric clung to his skin, he shivered, cold, uncomfortable, dizzy. He heard another pair of steps, this one lingered awhile. He scrunched himself further into a ball. *Just walk by. Please just walk by.*

Something lightly gripped his shoulder, his head shot up. **“Shhh”** They held him in place, his heart throbbing, he could still hear steps, they walked so close, pacing, turning, angry, then, they were gone. Replaced by the thick rain. The pressure released, a gentler pat on his back, as Ethan glanced their way.

His eyes widened. **“Vin?”** he asked, spotting the dark-haired male in front of him. He gave his usual unsettling smile; it was short-lived, he seemed preoccupied by the ongoing events.

“Stay quiet, follow me.” He whispered, carefully shuffling through the crates. Ethan trailed after him without question. They wandered only one street before a door opened, a small cluttered space settled among the normal houses in this part of town. Ethan’s hiding spot was almost in line with the window.

The interior was overly chaotic, papers in piles along the floor, crystal shards scattered across the table. Books stacked on shelves, falling to the wood below. It felt like someone actively researched in here, various books open or upturned, pages folded, notes poking out the edges. A small space was cleared in the centre, beside a couch that was also covered in books. **“Ah... well, the mess is not normally seen by others. I apologise.”** Vin stated, pushing books, papers, jars off the seat.

“Its fine. I’m just glad it’s dry. And...not outside.” Ethan sat down with Vin’s assistance, his body melting into the chair, blood still dripping.

Vin had taken a detour around the room, first checking the window, once he assumed all was safe, he went to the opposite corner, where all sorts of medical supplies resided, carefully placed as though he’d been prepared for this very situation. He briskly brought them over. **“Your luck persists”** Vin said quietly, lifting Ethan’s shirt to assess the damage. The bound wound now torn even further than it had originally.

” Barely. Kimiko put herself in danger for me.”

“Ah, hopefully she is. Safe.” He removed a small lid from a tin, removing a needle and thread. Ethan flinched upon spotting it. **“I can see you’re not fond of stitches.”** Vin said, threading the needle.

Ethan’s face scrunched. **“Is anyone?”** he asked with a grimace.

“That’s a fair point.” Vin started without warning, catching Ethan off guard as a cotton bud with alcohol rubbed across his wound. He bit his bottom lip, folding over a little, trying to retain some level of decorum.

“Ffff” Ethan clinched a fist, hitting the other side of the couch. Vin was meticulous, as if he’d done this many times prior. It took him no time at all to have the wound cleaned, stitched, and redressed. With the pain subsiding Ethan slumped into his chair, a minor shiver remained as he sat there still dripping wet. That was also not going to stand as Vin forcefully began removing wet clothing, throwing a blanket around him.

“That should suffice.” Vin brushed his hands clean, proceeding to shift a few piles of paper. Ethan looked like a burrito, his head the only thing visible.

With the couch, blanket, warmth raising comfort levels, the fatigue set in, his head light, the anxiety waning now that he was in the company of another friend. He watched Vin throw wood in the lit fireplace, setting his clothes nearby so they could dry off. He removed his own soaked shirt, tossing it beside the others. His body was covered in strange scars, almost medical. He swiftly sought to cover himself up, obtaining a similar turtleneck within minutes.

“I think we have something to discuss.” Vin sat on the floor, surrounded by books, he picked up a piece of paper, folding it carefully before pocketing it. **“With this...situation going on, it may be safer for you to travel with me if you plan on going to Lumire. If you continue toward your friend’s place, it’s likely you’ll encounter more of your grandfather’s knights.”** Ethan frowned; he looked to his feet. Fingers fidgeting beneath the blanket. Causing movement Vin could notice. **“This isn’t something to take lightly.”**

“Yeah. I know. But, I... I’m stuck.” Ethan clasped his hands together, leg bouncing as he leaned forward. **“Kimiko wants me to meet her at dawn. Kaizen will be back sometime tomorrow, once he’s here we’ll be fine. But... if I get caught then.”**

“Then it’s over. I’m aware of what you’d be going back to.” Vin’s words cut deep, Ethan shrunk even further, a blue light peeking out from the cracks of the blanket. The anxiety building.

“I know I have to go back eventually. I just. I thought I had more time. If I found him then...”

“Unfortunately, nothing is that easy in life. I also expected more from that exchange.” At this point Ethan’s head was barely visible, he’d resorted to hiding, the bouncing only intensified, a blue steam floating off into the distance. **“I think this conversation would be better had after you’ve rested”** The leg halted; fidgeting stopped. Ethan slowly poked his head out. **“Where was your friend supposed to meet you?”**

Kimiko sat beside a window, eyes peering over the edge as a few figures ran by. She ducked down, scooting further away from it. The room she was in was dusty, old, a gap in the roof let rain drizzle in. It pooled on the floor, a constant drip that was grating on the ears. She leaned her back against the wall, a tired sigh as she slunk down. Eyes closed; knees pulled toward her chest. Small scrapes across her shoulders, the damp cloak sprawled on the floor, pin carefully placed upright, undamaged. Her usual smile gone, replaced by a tired frown. She opened her eyes slowly, staring blankly into the room while the

rain trickled in. As she adjusted herself, she felt a pressure at her hip, a reminder she was carrying their stuff. She rifled through one bag, pulling out the familiar orange crystal. She snapped the bottom upward, eyes closed tight. **"Kaizen?"** she asked.

"Hello darling." A deeper voice rang back, oddly calming. One she found herself smiling at.

"Hey. Is Kaizen around?" she asked quietly.

"He's sleeping. Are you okay darling?"

Kimiko frowned, drooping. **"Yeah. It's just been a long day."**

There was a pause. She eyed the crystal expectantly, waiting for an answer. One soon came with a deep hum. She relaxed, her head pressed against the object, eyes closed. It was soft, gentle, calming, it swept through the room like a warm hug. She swayed in time with it, all her own stress melting away. As his hum ended, she opened her eyes, one hand released the crystal, rested on her knee, a more comfortable position. **"Thanks"** she whispered.

"Anytime sweetie."

"Can you tell Kaizen to get his ass here soon?"

"I will, and darling" she tilted her head, the smile as wide as before. **"Look after yourself please."**

"Heh. I dunno, that's a tall order, but for you, I'll try." She chuckled. **"I'll talk to you soon."** With one more click, the crystal dulled, the room fell quiet. She glanced at her surroundings; it was only a few hours until sunrise. It wasn't fancy, but it'd settle until then. **"...That little bastard better have gotten away."**

The rain dwindled to a light shower, raindrops falling in an uneven pattern, the sun peeking out from behind grey masses in the sky. The streets were relatively empty, the only real movement being those who were off to work. The majority of people barely willing to leave their homes while the rain lingered. The meeting spot contained two people, Ethan, who paced anxiously, and Vin who stood a short distance, hiding from the rain. The ground was littered in cracks, a protruding spike in the centre. A small piece of black fabric strewn across the top.

Ethan played with his fingers, muttering quietly under his breath as the pacing became faster. *How did they know she'd be here? Did she get followed?* Vin watched as that blue steam came off him again. **"We need to talk now that things have changed."** Vin stated.

Ethan stopped, hands curled to fists, lip upturned. Head lowered. **"I have to go after her."** His voice shaky, his body betraying him by mimicking it.

"They're probably trying to use her to coax your return." There was no audible response, only a boy standing in the rain unmoving, the pacing ceased. His expression glummer than before. **"You said yourself, she's capable. You can trust her to look after herself. Hasn't she been in worse situations than this?"**

"Yeah...but-"

“Then you need to choose, you can’t continue to travel if they catch you.” He motioned for Ethan to come over. The boy seemed hesitant, his thoughts a jumbled mess. **“Not to mention you’re injured, and I am no warrior.”**

“...I know.”

Vin sighed loudly, his hand sliding across his face. **“At the end of the day Ethan, you have to make a decision you can live with. I will stand by whatever that may be.”**

Ethan gave a slight smile. Though it dulled swiftly, he slowly wandered beside him, one hand gripping his arm, sliding across it periodically as his back hit the wall. **“I’m.... terrified. So far, anytime they come close to me, everything just...goes dark. Then I freeze.”** His lips pursed; grip tightened. **“But. Even if she’d be okay, I won’t know, and it’ll sit in the back of my mind forever. It just, wouldn’t be fair.”**

“...Somehow I knew this would be your answer.” He placed a hand on the boy’s shoulder. One eyebrow raised. **“Do you know what my profession is?”** he asked. Ethan shook his head. **“Well, you’re in luck. I can’t assist you physically, as I can’t rock the boat with the council, but I can give you some very helpful insight.”**

Light covered the buildings, washing over the town like a blanket, the rain faded away. Along the corner of the city, near the back gates sat a group of twelve, all wearing thick robes, long pointed ears peeking out from the fabric. Only one stood out, among all the long white hair, sat a vibrant blue, hands bound with thick stone cuffs, a sassy grin on her face as the elf taking charge of her ignored her unrelenting ramblings. **“With a personality like yours I imagine all the elven women are just lining up to kiss your ass, I mean...it’s the only thing you’ve got going for you.”**

The elf in question glared at her, a vein near popping on their forehead. **“ENOUGH!”** He growled;

Kimiko’s sneer grew bolder. **“Wow, first you tell me to talk, then you tell me to shut up. Boy you guys can’t make up your mind.”**

As the elf’s fist raised, a familiar woman’s voice cut the tension. **“Balten, show some decorum.”**

“...Yes milady.”

“Oooh, sucks to be you today don’t it?” Kimiko raised her arms over her head, while grinning incessantly at him. The man scoffed, turning his back to her. This didn’t deter Kimiko at all, she leaned over, scooting in his general direction until the woman stood in front.

“Kimiko, was it?” The woman’s voice was warmer than her companions, she leaned down, keeping a certain level of distance.

“Ooh. I’m getting famous” Kimiko winked, though her lip curled to a pout as she got a boring response.

“Please be patient. Once the young Master is here, you will be released. No one will cause you any harm.”

“Could’ve fooled me.” Kimiko lowered her arms back to her lap, purposefully showing off several bruises.

“The way you casually touched young master Wisp is unacceptable, if you were in the Celestial city you would have been punished more severely. However, we are considering this your only punishment should the young master come quietly.”

Kimiko let out a yawn, she leaned backwards, laying herself on the wet floor. **“Uh huh. When you get tired of him not showing up, you can wake me up.”** She rolled to one side; arms tucked under her head. The cuffs scraped across the floor while she got comfortable.

“You better hope he does.” The woman’s voice was bitter like the wind, she turned her back, looking instead to the remainder of her group. **“Any news?”** She asked, taking a few steps away. Kimiko listened intently, her ear twitching at any small movements. No one was paying her any mind while she toyed with her own restraints.

The sounds of those wandering around, alongside the subtle clicks of the lock were the only thing on her mind. **“What is that?”** someone’s confusion broke her focus, the conversation between two became many. All staring in the same direction.

She flicked herself back into a sitting position, half the street was covered in a thick blue mist. **“...You wouldn’t”** she whispered.

Within the looming clouds of blue, was the shape of a figure. It walked at the same pace, hair blowing wildly as the wind picked up, pushing the mist further in front. A brief glimpse of brown hair, lightly tanned skin, a scar on his right wrist, another on his left cheek. His shirt-stained red at one side. He walked with an air of confidence, soon devoured by the shifting mass that was his own aura.

The group of elves took a defensive stance; one soon squandered as the woman pushed in front. **“Master Wisp. Please, he only wishes to see you safely home-”** the figure in the centre of the mist doubled, walking at the same pace, they almost merged with the surrounding cloud. It grew nearer, a few within the group began to panic, one mage drew his book, one hand raised as they began chanting. The woman placed her hand atop the tome, **“You can’t hurt him”** she growled.

“Then what are we supposed to do?” He spat back.

The area around them tinted blue, it covered one person at a time, engulfing them like a wave. **“Restrain him!”** she yelled loudly. **“And don’t let her out of your sight Balten!”**

Kimiko sneered, watching the chaos unfold. Her supposed handler was in a panic all of his own, he didn’t notice her fiddling with her cuffs, a small clink was music to her ears. As the mist took over her too. The cuffs hit the floor.

Ethan walked through without care, his body glowing lightly, barely visible among the surroundings. One elf found him first, they jumped at him, arms curling around him, the elf fell to the floor, alone, the figure blowing away to nothing. Another took its place, then another. **“He’s in here somewhere!”** A deeper voice carried over to their peers. The woman too fell for a fake, struggling now as even her own ears were

betraying her. Each person in their group was chasing something be it fake or one of their own, no one could tell if it was his steps or theirs. **"We weren't told about this"** she whispered.

Kimiko wandered leisurely through the mist, only stopped as someone gripped her arm, she turned to an angry Balten. **"Nice try"** he sneered. Before she could attempt to retaliate the mist beside them spiraled, it began shifting form, becoming thin, round, pole-like. It struck forward, hitting Balten square in the chest, knocking him backwards. His grip waned; Kimiko watched in shock as the man hit the floor.

Another hand curled around her arm. Softer, familiar. She smiled. **"Idiot"**.

Ethan pulled her from the mist, running down a nearby street, sweat fell from his face, his breath heavy, legs wobbly, the biggest smile on his face. **"Did you expect otherwise?"**

As they walked a few more steps, he stopped, hands on his knees, breath struggling. **"I...gotta-"**

"I know. Just do it, I got the rest" She lightly hit his back. He tiredly raised an arm, eyes closed, he took in one big breath, a strong focus as blue began seeping their way. It sunk into his skin chunks at a time. As the last of it disappeared, Kimiko threw his arm over her shoulders, she pulled him forward, quickly making their way to a busier part of town. **"I can't believe you"** she chuckled.

"Same...but... I couldn't just leave you there."

Kimiko gave him a slight squeeze, a playful smirk on her face. **"You care about me."**

"...Maybe just a little."

They continued down the street, only stopping as a pair of footsteps came up behind them. Ethan felt his heart in his throat, Kimiko unbothered, glanced in their direction. **"Wait! Young master, please!"**

She inched closer, swiftly stopping as Kimiko glared at her. Ethan struggled to look her way, his body shaking. He'd worked so hard so he didn't have to encounter them front on. **"Ethan."** Kimiko turned him around **"What do you want?"**

Ethan clenched a fist. He pulled away, taking in one deep breath. Head raised, eyes staring directly at the person before them. **"I-I"** He stuttered, quiet, his anxiety plain. Kimiko hit him in the back. He stumbled forward, catching himself. A wave of annoyance took over as he glared at her. **"Seriously?"** he growled. Her smile set him more at ease. **"...I don't know what I want. But I know that I can't go back. Not yet"** He took one more step forward, his voice louder, more confident.

"But he-"

"I know. I know what he wants, but. I need this. I'll come back when I'm ready. It might be soon, it might not. But I will come back." His head lowered, worries still climbing. **"I know you're just doing your job, and he isn't happy about all this, but I just need a bit more time."**

She took a step forward; Ethan took one back. A near instant recoil. She frowned. **"You need not fear me. I-"**

“I do fear you.” Ethan was blunt, more than he wanted. He took another breath in, slowly attempting to relax as he exhaled. **“I’m not a Master, and I’m barely a Wisp. You probably didn’t even know I existed until all this started.”** She lowered her head.

“All I want is to protect and serve the Wisp household. If you should just let me-”

“I can’t. I don’t know you, I can’t trust you. If you wanted to make things right, you’d pretend you never saw me.” He began walking back, leaning into Kimiko as he found himself tiring fast.

The woman’s form slumped, her tongue tied, she merely watched as Ethan cozied up to a tyrant instead of one who was supposed to protect him. She pulled her hood back, revealing a particularly soft expression, a long scar across almost half of her face. Her hair symmetrical, not a strand out of place. She bowed to Ethan, much to his surprise. **“I, Elise. Captain of –**” She paused, realising titles did nothing in this situation. **“I shall do as you have asked.”**

She raised her head, a soft smile, her eyes a pale blue. Ethan glanced at Kimiko, who seemed a little unsure about the entire situation, but let Ethan do as he pleased. **“...Thank you, Elise.”** He spoke quietly, taking that moment to turn around, hoping to leave as he’d wanted this entire conversation, though found himself hesitant. She’d given him her name, a small part of him felt wrong not doing the same. **“If we see each other again.... Call me Ethan.”**

Content, he stepped forward, happy to finally gain distance, Kimiko joined him, assisting in keeping him upright as his stamina was running empty. **“Ah! One more thing!”** Elise spoke again, this time Kimiko went to complain, stifled by their bags hurled in their direction. She caught them both, surprised as Elise took one step back, maintaining space. Kimiko gave a light wave, swiftly leaving now that this event was over. Voices rang out not far behind, making for a prompt exit.

Once they left any sight of another elf, Ethan relaxed, slumping against Kimiko, the fatigue set in. Still awake, but barely so. Kimiko gave him a hearty squeeze while they walked. **“You finally did something other than run away”** she gleamed.

“Mm... thanks for your help.” Ethan smiled at her tiredly.

“I know, you couldn’t have done it without me. I’m just that good.” She tussled his hair, nearly pushing him over in the process.

Kaizen glanced at a tall, run down building, the roof partially collapsed, a side beam barely held together, windows broken, the door scarcely on its hinges, lightly banging as the wind passed by. Ivy crept across a large portion of its surface, weeds poked out of any cracks, desperate to claim sunlight. He raised an eyebrow at it, cautious as he stood on the front step toward the door, it crumbled under the weight of him. He begrudgingly tore his leg from rotten wood, flicking it to remove splinters stuck in his baggy trouser leg. With another attempt, he pushed through the door. The interior was worse; a musky smell took over the room. A drip came from the hole in the ceiling, the insect devoured floorboards groaned beneath him, everything dim, the only light from the partially covered sun above, sneaking in through the cracks of the upper floor. The surrounding area was filled with broken furniture, porcelain plates smashed near a wooden table, missing two legs. He felt glass under his bare feet, something that merely tickled as he walked through it. Another floorboard cracked underfoot, he swiftly caught himself.

As he continued through the house, he heard a strange noise coming from the corner. He readied himself, cautiously he took another step forward. A mass revealed itself in the darkness, sharp unnatural sounds echoing through the room as he got closer. He flexed his hands, taking one more step to get a better view. Within the dark corner of the room, sat Kimiko, slumped, head leaning on a similarly sleeping Ethan. They both snored loudly, comfortable despite the room. Kaizen chuckled, shaking his head lightly.

Chapter 6

Ethan found himself sitting in a dark space, the musty smell all but gone, there was a warmth similar to body heat coming off nearby, yet he sat on his own. He took a quick look around, the familiar, horrible room they'd fallen asleep in, everything was as it'd been left. The anxiety he'd held for so long had started to disappear. He felt strangely comfortable. It was light, despite no visible sun, an earnest blue glow.

A blue glow?

He leaned forward, glimpsing a light that shone around the corner. A gentle hum emanated from it. He stood himself up, the expected pain in his side never came, confused, he cautiously took a few steps forward. Seated in a broken chair, was a lively, beautiful aqua coloured figure. Hair long, unbound, pointed ears, a gentle smile. Her pose graceful, feet slanted while both hands settled in her lap, he stared at her in near disbelief, a butterfly settled on her shoulder. Bizarrely it was like her eyes didn't exist, her face was so familiar, yet not. Her voice calming, inviting. He crept closer, though he couldn't see it, he knew she was looking back. It didn't give him any unease. **"I knew you could do it."** Her voice was soft, sweet, caring, full of pride. He didn't comprehend why but it made him happy. He opened his mouth to speak

Silence.

...*A dream.* He frowned, inching closer. He felt an urge to sit beside her, watching as her hand reached for his. They passed through one another on contact, yet a warmth remained. He took a spot next to the chair. She leaned over, that familiar beautiful smile shared only with him. The sound of a water drop spurred a memory, anytime it rained this was what he saw. That smile, like she was watching over him while the panic set in. She was always here, even if he had no idea of who she was. She set her forehead to his, once again they phased through one another, yet his heart was overflowing. He wished he could say something, ask her questions, give appreciation. But his voice was empty. After a few long minutes she pulled back, her smile waned, a sense of sadness taking hold, she placed a hand on top of his. Their surroundings began to fade, churning, blurring, gradually changing to unfocused shapes, blending in with the darkness behind them. Things vanished one by one, until only the two of them remained.

He put his other hand atop hers, anxious as she too vanished. A bright light swept the room, blowing everything else away. He closed his eyes instinctively, his body grew heavy, movement, something lightly jostled him about. **"No idea. It's like someone knew"** *Kimiko?*

"Hm... We'll keep an eye out. Not much else we can do I guess". His eyes opened, met by a shifting forest floor. Baggy trousers coming in and out of view. He blinked twice, an inescapable yawn took hold, each muscle screamed out for a good stretch. He obliged, something Kaizen was unprepared for. He nearly tumbled over, stopped only by Kimiko's quick reaction. Her hands pressed hard against Ethan's back, resetting his centre of gravity.

"Aye, you're finally up." Kaizen chuckled; he swiftly regained his balance.

“Kaizen?” Ethan jolted backward, almost knocking him over again, Kaizen was forced to lower him down slowly. **“You make it sound like I was asleep for ages”** The moment his feet touched the ground, the stiffness in his joints became apparent. Soon remedied by a proper set of stretches.

“You only slept for an entire day and a half. Barely a nap” Kimiko smirked, leaving them both in the dust while wandering past.

“Wait really?”

“Yep. Don’t worry about it, we’ve still made some headway” Kaizen chimed in. He stood next to the boy, waiting for him to lead before following at a similar pace.

“Thanks.” Ethan rubbed the back of his neck, his hand brushed against fabric, loose, it was only then he noticed he was wearing his cloak. He glanced around as they walked, every forest path felt the same at this point, the only difference being the density in trees if you walked a man-made path or not. **“So where are we?”** he asked.

“On the way to a little place called Temnota Temple.” Kaizen copied Ethan by stretching out his arms, he towered the boy, pleased to have extra mobility. One bag hung on his shoulders; Kimiko held the other. **“I thought we’d take a detour, give us a little space between your pursuers before we head to my place. I have a bit of work that way too, so no real reason not to.”**

“That sounds nice.”

“Nice job by the way. I heard you finally stood up for yourself.” He gave Ethan a playful nudge

“...Yeah. I guess I did.” Ethan felt a warmth in his chest, he glanced between his party members, the environment, the lack of drama. He closed his eyes, taking in a deep breath, exhaled slowly. Everything felt so much lighter than before. His ability felt like it was in check after everything.

“You, okay?” Kaizen asked.

“Yeah. I feel really good actually.” He grinned, a light spring in his step.

“What about that wound of yours?” Kimiko asked, slowing down from the front.

Ethan stretched his side, twisting it. **“Feels fine.”**

“In that case” Her hand slipped into the bag at her hip. She rifled through, tossing the odd thing onto the forest floor. After a short while something flew in Ethan’s direction, he flinched, swiftly catching a short thick pole. His eyes widened; smiling as he held it firmly. His pole, an actual tangible weapon back in hand. **“I reckon it’s time for a break. No complaints right Kaizen?”** Kaizen’s concern was immediate, obvious; a sinister snicker came from their only female companion.

The trio found themselves on a wider part of the path, Kaizen seated comfortably on the ground, their belongings strewn about at his side. Ethan stood to his left a few steps away, the pole outstretched, nearly double its original length. Kimiko faced him, two thick sticks in both hands. She bounced on her toes, loosening her joints. **“Ready?”** She sneered. Ethan put one-foot forward, the pole behind him, upper body lowered.

“Yeah.”

The moment the word left his lips, Kimiko dashed forward. She ran low, weapons on either side as she swung. The boy steeled himself, the pole spun, clashing with one. The other kept momentum, swiftly stopped by the continuous spin of the pole. She jumped to the side; the second collision caused the pole to recoil. She slid behind him, aiming for his non injured side as she struck again. He lunged forward, the

stick barely grazing his shirt. He twirled the pole behind him, it passed from one hand to the other, forcing Kimiko to move.

“Not bad!” She grinned.

Ethan turned to face her. Grip tightened, he thrust the metal forward, his hand sliding down to lengthen his reach. Kimiko ducked underneath; her smile sinister as she used both sticks to knock it from below. The imbalance knocked it from Ethan's hand, a swift victory as one stick sat neatly against his chest. **“...Damn”** Ethan let out a loud sigh. His body slumped as Kaizen grabbed the fallen pole from nearby.

“Better.” She wagged a finger at him, **“Buuuut.... Still not enough.”** She gleamed. **“Whelp. I had my fun. We can keep going.”** Kimiko dropped her *‘weapons’*, one leg taking the brunt of her weight. **“Annnnd when you lose-”** She waved the same finger; her other hand settled at her hip. Tail playfully swishing about, her grin widened.

“Yeah yeah, I know. I’ll carry the bags.” Ethan rolled his eyes, feet shuffling through the dirt, defeated. Kaizen held up the loser's reward. Ethan, despite his grumpy state, took the bag politely, carefully putting it over his shoulder, he offered to take the other one but Kaizen declined while standing.

“Ah. Finally, got rid of that damned bag” Kimiko gloated; her voice irritating enough Ethan could feel his blood boil.

“Ugh. One of these days I’m going to beat you” he growled.

“You can try~” Kimiko hummed back.

“I can take it, I don’t mind.” Kaizen chimed in. His grip tightened on the strap; face contorted in an annoyed manner.

“Nah, it’s part of the rules” After a long inhale his expression loosened. That smile returned, though only a little. Kaizen watched him with the same sadness as before his last departure, he seemed distracted, glancing at Ethan's-stained shirt multiple times. He opened his mouth to speak but found himself tongue tied. Ethan hadn't noticed, still in his own little world. He was enjoying the quiet, for once Kimiko's gloating had been minimal. Their fight went well considering he'd just woken up, he felt like he had a bit more control. There was an air of confidence about him, back straight, strides long. **“Thanks for coming back.”** He spoke in a more relaxed tone.

Kaizen looked a little shocked at first, though soon joined him, his hands slipping into his pockets. **“Of course. If I left you two for too long, I think she’d break you”**

“...You aren’t wrong.” Ethan shuddered. The duo chuckled, while Kimiko glared from the front.

The days blended together as the trio walked along the forest path, the distractions endless, getting lost, chased by wildlife, though half the time it ended up on their campfire. Ethan challenged Kimiko to several rematches, each one ending the same way, his improvements were minor but never enough. Kaizen relented, handing their bags to the increasingly grumpy boy. In an attempt for a change of pace Kimiko forced the two to spar next, leading to Kaizen carrying everything after falling over mid fight, knocking over a small tree.

A tall stone building towered the trees, Ethan's eyes sparkled. It stood in near ruin, large chunks of it crumbled into the massive pristine lake to its side. The bricks were thick, each one engraved, leading into one large design, cut off by the destruction of time. A few smaller buildings scattered across the clearing, the path paved with many loose stones stamped into packed dirt. Plants claimed ownership of the edge, threatening to crawl closer in a thick heap, only held back by careful gardening. The temple was carefully maintained, parts of it being rebuilt with so much care.

Small crowds entered the structure, multiple attendants kept a close eye on everything, a single scholar stood at its entrance, greeting passersby. Their stature proud, tall, short horns atop her head, a vest covered in heavy embroidery slimly fitted to her figure, a long-sleeved black shirt underneath with vibrantly colourful purple gemstones on the cuff, accented in silver. Her hair was short, blonde, swooping to one side. Both hands gloved in dark purple. A tie held her collar together, it too embroidered with a stunningly detailed pattern in silver thread. Tiny sparkles of gems strewn throughout the design. She had no shoes, instead showcasing white fur with meticulously manicured hoofs.

Every person who passed by received a warm bow, one hand in front, the other behind her. Ethan watched her in astonishment, everyone who traversed the stairs shared in her gesture, not a single person didn't. Kaizen brazenly wandered in her direction; his sloppy appearance way more intense as he stood in her company. **"Audrey!"**

The woman virtually broke character as Kaizen came her way, an uncharacteristic tooth bearing grin on her face which was rapidly corrected. **"Zenzen! I've been waiting."** She coughed. Kimiko snickered, hiding a laugh. Audrey took another step forward, a brilliant white fur covering every part of her, tiny patches of light brown created freckle like marks. The bridge of her nose was flat, cheeks prominent. She looked to be middle aged, difficult to pinpoint due to the way she held herself. Her ears were similar to a deer, poking out on both sides, earrings dangled from both, with a silver chain hanging from two points.

"I see you've not come alone." She peered around him, spotting a familiar face in Kimiko, the two seemed at odds, immediately looking away from one another, though one was less obvious. Once she spotted Ethan, she lingered on his ears, his hood hanging around his shoulders.

Kaizen gave Ethan a light pat on the back pushing him forward a step, **"This is Ethan. He's probably going to ask you a million questions while we're here."**

The boy's face turned red, he shrunk in place, attempting to hide as he couldn't argue back, Kaizen was right, he already had several in mind without even stepping foot into the building. **"H-hello..."** he stammered out.

Audrey grew excited, ears flapping lightly, she stepped closer, swiftly cupping Ethan's hands in her own. **"A man of culture!"** she gleamed. **"I will answer anything that is within my realm of expertise."** She quickly regained herself, coughing once again. Her hands returned to her side. She hid her own embarrassment well. Though Kimiko scoffed at it all.

"This is Audrey Ashcroft. She's in charge of the restoration here." Kaizen continued. The distinguished woman gave a polite bow. When she came to her full height she dwarfed most, yet still fell short compared to Kaizen.

"You can put your things in my quarters; I'll find someone to relieve me for a while so I can debrief you Zenzen."

"Come on, Zenzen." Kimiko teased, walking in the direction of the smaller buildings, clearly familiar with the area. Kaizen rolled his eyes, following after her. Ethan returned Audrey's bow; he gave a shy smile, quickly chasing his companions.

With everything set aside, the group of four took a seat at a particularly lavish table, curves and spiralled engravings detailing the surface all the way to the edge. The room was filled with shelves, each one packed to the brim with thick leather-bound books. Stacks of papers lined a nearby desk, alongside many detailed drawings, a few greyscale photos littered the surface hiding among everything else. Despite the chaos of objects, it was incredibly well organised.

Kimiko swung in her seat, feet on the table, chair tilted backward, she took no care in how she treated the furniture, a habit that irked their host. They let it slide, their arms folded, back straight while gazing in

Kaizen's direction. **"You know the gist of things, but it escalated a few nights ago. "She started. "Originally, the brutes lingered around the temple, they're within their rights for that. Then the harassment began for my staff. It was minimal, nothing we haven't dealt with before. They recently assaulted two of them, and stole something from the temple. We've yet to retrieve it."**

"You guys kept the temple open after all that?" Kaizen asked.

"We never show the public our misfortunes. It is important to keep up appearances in case someone takes advantage of the situation."

Kaizen nodded, one finger rested on his lip, his hand settled on his chin, one could almost hear the gears turning. The chair underneath him groaned considerably. **"I'll have a look around. If you can show Kimiko what was taken then she can probably find it. It can't have gone far"**

Kimiko snapped a glare at him, annoyed that her assistance was offered up without her input, her stare visibly made the target uncomfortable, but as she had little choice, she eventually waved a hand in agreement. **"I appreciate your help. Please forward my gratitude to Brombles as well."**

Kimiko snickered again, her sour mood gone, the urge to laugh held back by one hand. Ethan watched her in amazement while Kaizen gave her a side-eye. **"I'll let him know."** He sighed.

"Fantastic! In that case, while you do your sweep of the place, I shall borrow your particularly cultured companion, and we can inspect the temple grounds."

"Sure. Oh, Ethan, try not to run off on your own, okay?" Kaizen gave a stern look, almost like a parent.

"Okay." The boy responded, uneasy at being called out so openly. He knew why, most of his problems lately had appeared when he was by himself, or close to it.

With everything concluded, Kimiko was the first to dart from her chair. She almost escaped out the door before Audrey called her back for the photo. The moment it touched her hand, she vanished. Kaizen took off soon after, leaving Ethan with someone he barely knew. She excitedly clapped her hands together, beckoning him toward the door. Cautiously he trailed after her.

They walked to the temple entrance, greeted by a young man who had taken her place. His attire was plain, but they retained elegant platinum hair, they were also a fawn. Their bow was gentle, respectful but not as eye-catching. Ethan carefully tried to mimic the motion before stepping inside. **"You had questions for me?"** Audrey asked.

"I wanted to ask about this place; I've never really been in a temple before." He glanced around the spacious room they'd entered, the majority of the ceiling still intact, sunlight peeked in through a few open holes, while lanterns lit up everything else. A light breeze came from the gaps in stone, whisking away what would've been a stale air.

"Not a lot is known about this temple. Which makes it all the more enticing!" Her voice echoed loudly, the other three people in their presence subtly whispered and giggled among themselves, but it didn't faze Audrey. She excitedly paraded around the room, hands behind her back, stance tall, jovial.

Ethan's eyes trailed the walls, almost every surface was engraved, vine-like imagery all culminating to one point, missing large chunks. It looked as though someone had purposefully destroyed that one piece. **"It all connects"** he whispered.

"You noticed?" Audrey stood at his side.

"Mm. These things kind of look like vines, but they don't have leaves on them." He leaned down, his fingers following the groove. **"The lanterns don't look like they were designed to be in here, was this place built to be in the dark?"** he asked.

“Yes, I don’t know the purpose, but every room was built without light, except one. She turned to another door, waiting patiently for Ethan to follow suit. The design led in that direction, crossing the floor. Each engraving was carefully hand carved, the tiny notches of a chisel left behind. Something stirred in the pit of the boy’s stomach, these shapes reminded him of something, yet he couldn’t pinpoint it. They entered a larger room, this one in shambles, a large chunk of the wall and ceiling missing, letting in a lot of light. Multiple people walked around, both scholar and curious travellers.

The engravings were more intense in this room, for what remained of it. Ethan found himself drawn to them, following everything he could see as it culminated in the middle of the floor. This spot was dug out in a curve as though someone was supposed to stand there. What was left of the ceiling above yielded an oddly empty space, like the original construction was missing something in this area. **“They had a skylight?”** Ethan pondered.

“An interesting theory. We aren’t entirely sure, this part is the most decayed, but it could have been a skylight. The pattern all leads here. We’ve spent a long time trying to decipher everything, but as a lot of our history contains nothing, we’ve found ourselves at constant roadblocks.” She wandered a little further in, standing in the groove. **“My father started this restoration. All I know is what little he could piece together. There was another scholar who took interest in it, he was studying a strange marking, and it brought him here.”**

“Marking?” Ethan said quietly.

“Mm, it wasn’t present in this place, but apparently it led them to a particularly interesting crystal. They delivered it here a few years later.” She grew disappointed, Ethan assumed that was likely what went missing. The pair continued their stroll through the main chamber, large wooden beams held what was remaining in place. He spotted a few other rooms off to the side; curiosity piqued his interest as he disappeared into one of them.

Kaizen wandered around the encampment, taking in the general sights, hands in his pockets. He spotted a few strange individuals but nothing of note, this place was a bit of a tourist trap for the average traveller, they had a few small stores out the front selling various wares, the funds helping the effort of restoration. A few more permanent buildings had been constructed in the area, an inn, a few small houses, even a courtyard. It wasn’t large, it didn’t take him long to find the cause of their plight. A trivial group of men hanging around the edge of the courtyard, close to the forest edge. Each one proudly displaying a crystal being devoured by a serpent.

As Ethan stepped into the other room, his heart flew into his throat, there, in the centre, alone, brightly lit by the sun up high, was *him*. There was no ceiling, nothing obscured his view this time, he could clearly see short brown hair, a goatee on his chin, otherwise clean shaven. An upward scar on one eyebrow, his skin lightly tanned, the same as Ethan’s. He wore a red shirt, open at the front just below his pecks, it felt oddly unlike him but accented his well-built torso. His pants were black, fitted, held up by a matching belt with a silver buckle. He looked tired, worn. Despite people walking into the room, he seemed to exist in his own small world, not yet noticing the boy who couldn’t pull his gaze away.

The markings along the pillars, walls and floor led to the spot nearby. Ethan’s vision flashed, a corridor, that same figure but hair long, dark clothing. A looming darkness behind him, it sprawled along the floor, walls, the windows. His breath stopped, sweat fell from his brow, his body shook as he couldn’t tear away.

“Ethan?” Audrey asked, she popped up behind him. The tone carried through the room, stirring a reaction from the man in front, he slowly turned in their way, bright green eyes staring at them both. He looked shocked to start with, then inched forward. Ethan’s mind snapped, thoughts began swirling, cutting off any rationality. *Why was he here? How was he here? What was that?* He spun around, sprinting out of the room, through the main room and out the temple entrance, he didn’t look back, head down, he

couldn't answer Audrey as he heard her call after him. He needed to leave, to get out of there, his mind begged for something else, anything else.

He stumbled down the temple steps, vision a near blur, one tall figure stood out, safety. He ran into them at full force, though it didn't affect their stance in the slightest. **"Woah!"** Ethan peered up at him, eyes drenched in fear. He felt foolish, like a small child. He struggled to get proper breaths in, though for once no steam came off his shoulders. Audrey was not far behind, briskly walking their way, worried. Kaizen noticed movement in the forest edge; the men he'd been eying disappeared. A twinge of anxiety hit him. Something was off. **"...Let's go inside for a minute."**

Ethan sat on an overly decorated chair, hands in his lap, head down. Kaizen knelt in front of him, Audrey stood nearby, a tray of cookies and tea on the table. **"Feel any better?"** Kaizen asked. Ethan gave a brief nod, gaze settled on the floor, he refused to look anywhere near a window or door. Audrey knew better than to pry, she placed her hand on top of Ethan's. **"You can stay here as long as you need."** She smiled. With that, she gave the two some privacy.

"...Sorry. I thought I was doing better."

"You are. This is just a hiccup. Even if he's here, you're not alone alright? We're here, Audrey and her staff will do what they can for you. You're among more friends than enemies." He spoke in a warm tone, comforting.

Ethan wondered if this is what Ty and Kimiko grew up with, someone who reassured them when things got hard. Someone who'd comfort them when they were scared. He'd almost made himself jealous at the thought. He wanted to be selfish, keeping this little bit of attention for himself for a while. But he wasn't a child anymore, he could stand on his own two feet. **"It's okay. I won't run again."**

"...You're allowed to run away when things are difficult. Just because you did something once, doesn't mean you're completely changed. It takes time."

"I know. But I can't always run away. I don't want to be weak forever."

Kaizen frowned **"...Right."** He seemed uncomfortable, unsure what to say. He shook his head, forcing a smile instead. **"You got your weapon?"** Ethan glanced over to their bags, Kaizen took the initiative to pull the pole from one of them, taking a moment to rifle through their things, much like Kimiko half of the contents ended up on the floor before he handed him the right item. **"You can keep this close. We won't be long, then we'll head back to my place. Okay?"**

Ethan nodded. He felt better, at least a little. A small part of him ached at the fact he ran from the problem. He'd looked for him for so long, now the sight of him was like a nightmare. **"...I still want to see the temple."** Ethan said quietly.

"You sure?" The boy didn't respond, waiting for some kind of confirmation. **"Okay, I'll come with you. Audrey is outside, she'll love talking about it some more."**

"You don't have to-"

"I want to. Come on." He didn't await a response, happily standing back up, hands in his pockets, leisurely walking to the door. Ethan hesitantly trailed him. The pair met Audrey outside, she seemed overly pleased to resume their previous chat. The group headed back into the temple; Ethan's nerves on full display as he struggled to keep his gaze in one place. Cautiously glancing at each figure they walked by. They reached the room he'd been in prior; empty. Ethan felt relief, but at the same time, he was disappointed. He wished deep down that he had stayed, maybe he could have said something, maybe he had no idea who he was. He pushed it out of his mind; there was no point dwelling on it.

He inspected the room, cautiously branching away from the pair. He stared at the spot his father stood, that memory returning in a daze. He'd had this before, a while back he'd seen something similar, a big dark figure, though this one was shaped like a bird. He'd never seen books on it, nothing he'd read or

anywhere they'd explored talked about those things. **"What does the temple name mean?"** Ethan asked, glancing back. She clapped her hands, briskly walking over.

"It means Darkness. Quite fitting don't you think?" she gleamed. Ethan took another quick look around, he'd noticed some odd merging of the vines along one of the pillars, often converging and creating a marking he could've sworn he'd seen before.

"Does it have anything to do with those shadowy monsters?" as he spoke, Audrey looked confused. **"What do you mean?"** She grew even more engaged, curious, Kaizen stood behind them both, visibly shaken, though Ethan couldn't see it.

"Um. Like, a shadow that moves only across the ground. No person, just...a shadow"

"You've seen something like that before?"

"Yeah... I wrote it down in my journal but-" he reached for his pocket, flinching as he neared it, right the book was gone, that damned boar crushed it. He cursed Kimiko, but as he hadn't any other options, he pulled out the notepad and charcoal. **"Like this. But I feel like I've seen two of them before. One was kind of like a bird, the other one...it looked like someone I knew. Kind of."** He sketched a dark shape, similar to a raven, the other had the sketch of a man in front, folded over, the shadow spanning what looked like a wall. Audrey was astounded, she took the paper gently, inquisitively scanning it. **"These vines."** She said quietly. **"Yeah, they're similar to the second one."** Ethan reiterated. He barely remembered it; he wasn't even sure if it was a memory or dream.

Kaizen's silence had caught Ethan's attention. **"Is something wrong?"** that shock had never left him.

"Uh." He flinched, giving an awkward smile, an obvious attempt that fooled no one. **"Yeah. Sorry, I was just kinda caught up in my own world for a second."**

Ethan narrowed his gaze. Dismissing it for now; he returned to the pattern on the floor. Curiously trailing them to that spot in the middle. **"Were there any intact images of what normally converged here?"** he asked.

"Sadly not. Even before my father's time, this place has remained the same. Whoever destroyed the carvings on the wall, had no intention of letting the next generations view its history."

It wasn't that uncommon for things like this to be erased from history, be it due to poor records, or intentional. Ethan pondered their few facts, his mind pleasantly occupied by a small mystery he knew he'd likely never solve. It served as a fantastic distraction. He and Audrey wandered the temple for a few hours, her own theories giving him joy as they discussed various ideas between each other. Kaizen trailed behind; caught in his own thoughts, he looked particularly bored but kept close regardless. All the way up until they decided to stop for a meal.

Kimiko had meandered about, mostly keeping to herself, hiding from Audrey if she saw her. She'd spotted the same group as Kaizen, but as he was preoccupied, she took it upon herself to see where they'd set up camp. There weren't many of them, barely a group compared to the numbers they'd seen in Nova, a max of about nine scattered about the place. Two in their camp, the others wandering around aimlessly. The two Kimiko had expected to see were nowhere to be found, but she had seen a particularly distressed gentleman briskly walking back to camp.

The item they'd been looking for was proudly displayed in open air, dropped in the centre of their base, unguarded, almost as though someone had tossed it there without a second thought. She raised an eyebrow, this wasn't...well thought out, at least it didn't appear to be. Perhaps because their usual leadership wasn't around, but even then, *why would they take an item that holds no value outside of this one temple?*

The smell of a hot meal wafted through the small enclosed home, the carefully decorated table now dressed with a heavily embroidered table cloth, candle sticks evenly spaced, black plates with silver rims strewn across the surface, all filled with various goodies. Everything cooked to perfection. Ethan sat salivating; the smell alone made him joyous to be alive. His own plate was overflowing, utensils in both hands. Kaizen and Audrey were already eating, able to keep conversation between bites. Something about the present situation the dragon was helping with. Ethan barely kept attention; he opened his mouth wide, excited to take one big bite.

Chomp

"Mm. Not bad." Kimiko grinned slyly, his fork empty.

"Hey!" He glared her way, she took no mind, snagging an empty seat. As he finally put a piece of food in his mouth, she snatched his plate, sliding it in front of her. At this point Ethan didn't even complain, making himself another one.

"You find anything?" Kaizen asked, his plate filling with its third helping.

"Their camp isn't far. I'm gonna pick it up when it gets dark."

"Quietly, right?" Kaizen asked, eyes narrowed.

"Ugh. You're boring. Yes, SIR. I'll pick it up discreetly." She rolled her eyes. **"Can I come?"** Ethan piped up.

"Sure. Why not."

"...I don't think that's the best idea."

"Nah it's fine. Those idiots are so disorganised it's laughable." Kimiko waved her fork back and forth, the odd piece of food flying across the table. Her lack of manners clearly bothered Audrey who was attempting to create a dignified atmosphere.

Kaizen seemed unsure about the whole thing, eyeing Ethan with a worried expression. **"Yeah but, what about-"**

"I can defend myself if we get in trouble." Ethan puffed out his chest, attempting to showcase his confidence. This did nothing for Kaizen's insecurities, but it caused a loud bout of laughter for Kimiko.

"Hah! Just let the kid come. It's good training. There's not many of them anyway. Easy pickings." she grinned.

The next few minutes were awkward, silence hung high, suffocating the party, yet Kimiko was quite comfortable. She struck up another conversation, this time including Audrey, which took no time at all to become a near heated topic. Once food was finished, Kaizen decided to make his rounds. Audrey went to check up on her team, and Kimiko got Ethan ready for their fun little adventure.

As the sun dipped from the sky, the duo took to the forest. It took no time to reach their destination, there were a few more than before, all surrounding a bonfire, laughter, flasks thrown at one another between conversation. Some near drunk before evening had really started. The item that wasn't theirs unguarded, no one in the centre could see it from their present location. All the people counted were there, bar one. She grinned, flicking her head Ethan's way as if to tell him to start moving. He obliged, cautious as she took lead. It was no effort, Kimiko in her infinite boredom had given up sneaking, waltzing through without a care, unnoticed. She threw Ethan the prize, he caught it in a panic, careful not to drop it. It was purple, kind of dull, it didn't seem important enough to warrant theft. He doubted it could've sold for anything either.

With their task done, they headed toward town, Kimiko cursed the lack of challenge, feet scuffing, purposefully hitting a bag on their way out. It toppled, creating enough noise to blow their cover. The men's laughter cut through the silence; they were so deeply engrossed in conversation they hadn't heard a thing. Ethan motioned for her to be more careful, annoyed. His eyes widened as she plucked the bag from the dirt, grip tight, arm back, she flung it forward hurling it into the back of someone's head. **"PAY SOME FUCKING ATTENTION!"** she yelled.

Ethan's heart sat in his throat, *not again*. **"You said you'd be discreet"** he growled. Her grin egged him on; daggers removed from their sheaths. The end result was the same as always, one big fight. She ran straight in, downing two people in minutes, their drunk behaviour slowing their movements. Ethan stuffed the crystal in his pocket, he flicked his pole, the two ends extending outward, he twirled it into an oncoming man, striking him square in the chin. As another came up behind him, he kept his weapon spinning, hitting them in the side. On their recoil he smacked them harder on the opposite side. They lost balance, tumbling down. He felt confident, able to hold his own so long as he had a weapon in hand. As the first one stood back up, he opted to try without it, his hand radiating blue, his pole shifted to one side while he created a new one out of nothing. He thrust it forward, hitting his opponent once, enough to knock them over.

It vanished swiftly after. He radiated delight. He gripped his weapon firmly, prepared to take on another. A looming dread struck him, something caught his view to the right, a fist inches from his face, its speed outmatching his reaction time. Kimiko dragged him down. The attack continued, striking someone behind them both. They flew backwards, a loud crack echoing through the night. Ethan had no doubt, he stared up at his father, a horrifying wide-eyed stare, that kindness he'd once seen, replaced by a malice that sunk into his core. Kimiko rolled him away; they bolted in the direction of safety. Bloodlust radiating behind them made even her err on the side of caution.

Once they'd cleared the campsite, she released his arm, pace the same. Ethan chased after her, adrenaline high, that face terrified him, those small wins he achieved were nothing compared to the display of raw power. He could hear yelling behind, but he ignored it all. As the temple came into view, Kimiko left his sight, not unusual when they ran from a problem she caused. Something grabbed his wrist, yanking him into some nearby bushes. A hand covered his mouth, bright pink nails. His blue eyes glanced their way, long pink hair tied at the bottom, a ribbon on her neck, flawless beautiful light skin. Black eyes with bright pink in the centre. *Teresa*. She was shaking, nervous, scared. He attempted to pull away, but that malice returned, overpowering them both as they hid. He watched cautiously, that mass of muscle, fist drenched in red, walked so brazenly in the open. Muscles tense, large bags under his eyes, frantic.

As he disappeared from view, her grip waned. Her eyes teary, fingers lightly curling around the sleeves of a small black woollen cardigan. **"I'm sorry."** She whimpered, holding back tears. Ethan froze, confused, until he recalled what she'd done that night. She had set that whole crowd ablaze in violence, yet here she acted like a scared victim. **"I didn't want to do it!"** She cried, her hands reaching for his, he swiftly pulled away.

"...What do you mean?" Ethan asked, scooting back without leaving the cover of the bush. She hesitantly glanced in the direction his father had gone. She held her tongue, fidgeting again. **"...He made you?"** Ethan asked.

She nodded. **"So, when I asked you about him."** Ethan narrowed his eyes, a part of him felt like he should console her, while something inside him was screaming to get away.

"I didn't want him to hurt you." She whispered. She made herself smaller. Her makeup running, long dark streaks down her face. Ethan felt a tad guilty, yet he couldn't bring himself to trust her explicitly. He glanced at where Kimiko had gone. He moved to stand, Teresa's hand grabbed hold of his, she squeezed it tight, sobbing quietly.

He awkwardly stayed put. He couldn't just leave her, right? If she had no agency in her situation, then they were kind of similar. **"...I'll hear you out."** Ethan said guardedly. Teresa's tears stopped abruptly; she wiped the remains with one finger.

“Okay” she whimpered. Ethan noticed a rustle in the brush behind them, he tensed, preparing his weapon. **“He’s safe.”** She held out both hands, a sign of peace, as a man dressed in a fine leather jacket, hair perfectly trimmed, blonde, a beard that complimented his facial features stepped into view. Even though Ethan hated looking at him, anyone could tell this man cared for his looks.

“...If we’re talking then we’re going somewhere public.” The boy was firm.

Teresa looked uncomfortable, but the man beside her gave a soft reassuring nod. **“Can do.”**

The group stood at the edge of the temple, covered by darkness, but close enough to friends that Ethan felt okay. Kaizen was in view from their side, something that put the other two on edge. **“Hm. If you two are being hunted by your own group. Then you’d be better off talking to Kaizen. I can’t help you with this.”** Ethan’s arms were folded; his weapon at his side, easily within reach.

“We can’t do that.” Teresa said quietly. **“With everything we’ve done, they won’t forgive us.”**

“My friends aren’t monsters. If you explain yourselves properly then they’ll understand.”

“That ain’t likely kid.” The blonde shook his head. He hovered over Teresa in a protective manner.

“You had your own ideas about what kind of person I was after Nova. You still don’t trust me, even after I told you the truth.” she frowned, one hand travelling up and down her arm in an anxious manner.

Ethan pondered on it. Sceptical, though that twinge of guilt nagged at him. She had been really good to him before that performance, but if she wanted to protect him, why did she invite him specifically to that event? **“What did you want from me then?”** he asked.

“A truce. The lady just wanted you to know all this wasn’t her idea.” The man kept an eye on Ethan as he stood in silence awhile, still unsure. He tapped a finger, his foot followed suit.

“Okay. I can give you that.” he unfurled his arms, prepared to leave now that their conversation was over. Teresa seemed relieved, happily smiling at her companion. They seemed to really care for one another. An odd sight after what both of them had done during the festival. **“What’re you two going to do?”** He asked, as he walked past them both. Stopping a little closer to town.

“We’re gettin as far from here as we can. No need ta worry bout us lad.”

“Thank you doll. Come on Byron. We should get out of here” Teresa tugged the burly man’s hand, pulling him through the brush.

“By the way kid, I’d be careful who you listen to.” Byron waved. They promptly disappeared into the darkness, leaving Ethan on his own. He stilled for a short while longer, *what did he mean?*

With the event over, Kimiko was chastised for returning alone, even more so for starting a fight. Ethan had the joy of watching, which resulted in a heavy pout from Kimiko for the remainder of the evening. Audrey had set up a place for the party to rest, though only two took part, Kaizen wandered the grounds, despite the fact the problem had been sorted, he felt uneasy.

As dawn broke, Ethan was up, he inhaled a deep breath of the morning air, content, proud, he even felt a little bit stronger. Though that show of power lingered in his mind, a goal, an impossible one, but a goal all the same. If he could strike with that level of strength, then even if he went home, he’d be okay. He stretched himself out, each bone groaning one by one. As everything loosened, he spotted Audrey at the temple entrance. She radiated positive energy, Kaizen stood at her side, a seriousness in conversation that was clearly one sided. Ethan cautiously wandered over, careful not to interrupt the two. **“I can’t thank you enough.”** Audrey’s tone was warm. Despite Kaizen having her full attention, she spotted Ethan promptly.

“Good morning, Ethan!” She cheered gleefully. **“Hey!”** Kaizen joined in.

“Morning. Please don’t let me interrupt.” He waved his hands lightly, hoping they’d go back to their previous conversation.

“Nah, we were done anyway” Kaizen slouched, hands in his pockets.

“Those ruffians disappeared, the crystal is back, all is right with the temple.” Audrey gleamed, she gave one hearty smack to Kaizen’s back, it made no reaction despite the loud thud it came with, he didn’t budge an inch.

“So... if they’re gone what does that mean?” Ethan asked.

“It means we head out soon. When Kimiko is up, and after we pick up some food for the road, we can head toward home.” Kaizen grinned. **“I’m glad it was an easy fix for once. Last time we were here for a week.”** He complained. **“That was troublesome.”**

Ethan pondered on the event a while, lost in thought as the two reminisced. *They just left? The item they stole looked thrown to the side, then after only two of them did anything, they just packed up?* Something felt off. Last time they’d planned something it ended in a bloodbath, but this was...strangely unorganised. He tapped his foot, maybe it was because Teresa and Byron weren’t part of the group anymore?

Something weighed heavily on one shoulder, shifting his balance. A loud yawn directed in his ear; he struggled to keep himself upright as it leaned even further in. One arm around his neck, resting on his shoulder. **“Sup nerds”**

Ethan attempted to shrug her off, but she pulled him back with her other arm. She hung off him while feigning exhaustion. His failed attempts to remove her ended with him letting it happen, merely dealing with her low energy annoyance. **“If we’re all up then we can probably get ready to go”** Kaizen watched the two, chuckling, he enjoyed their dynamic despite the fact Ethan was clearly unhappy. **“Finally.”** Kimiko slunk down even further, she released the boy, jumping back on her feet with enthusiasm.

“I will assist in finding anything you need before you head off.” Audrey smiled, she nodded to an attendant nearby, relieving her from her duties. With that, the group as a whole explored the area. They picked up food, replaced a few things lost. Audrey bought more than required, tossing everything at Kaizen, she merrily enjoyed spoiling the others. Her short tail and ears wiggled anytime she found another item she could buy for someone. Kimiko was given new clothes, she showed interest for the first time since they got here, excited as she adorned a slim black shirt and shorts, her midriff on show. New black boots hugged her legs, a hint of yellow on the bottom. Tied together with a bright yellow jacket, well past the knee. She spun in place, the two girls gushing over her appearance while the boys watched. Kimiko looked pretty, she’d always looked pretty, but Ethan wasn’t used to her wearing such tight fitted clothing. He found himself blushing, Kaizen noticed, he playfully hit his shoulder.

Their bags restocked, a cheerful Kimiko, and their job done, they’d returned to the temple entrance. Ethan took one more look around the place, knowing he’d not likely be back. He sketched parts of it, no one took this time away from him, instead happily chatting nearby, Kimiko enjoyed a small bag of cookies, coated with a thick layer of icing. Sharing was out of the question as Kaizen tried to take one only to be growled at.

As the sun hit its peak, they prepared their leave. Audrey gave Kaizen a big hug, close to knocking him off his feet. Kimiko avoided the one aimed her way. Ethan happily claimed his, the few hugs he had gotten over the year were a comfort. As he pulled back Audrey gave a big smile. **“I’ll miss you Eefy, I hope to see you again soon.”** she said quietly. Kaizen chuckled a bit, Kimiko’s laughter was loud, obnoxious. Ethan stood in disbelief. *Eefy? Was that me?* He stared at her, unsure how to respond. **“Ah, if it’s too much I don’t have to call you by-”**

"That's my nickname?" Ethan asked. Audrey nodded. He blinked twice, deliberately he took another step forward. She became unsure, Ethan's face was now not entirely visible. His arms shaking, time passing painfully slow before he looked her way, tears in the corner of his eyes, a big smile on his face. **"I really like it."** He sniffled. Her face lit up, raising a hand to gently pat his head.

Someone liked me enough to make a nickname, just for me. He could barely contain his joy; he hugged her again. He didn't care that Kimiko continued to laugh behind him, Audrey hugged him even tighter, lifting his legs off the ground for a moment. **"Come back soon."** She whispered.

"I hope to." She let him go, he took a step back, standing happily next to Kimiko who'd finally ceased.

With their business concluded, goodbyes given, hearts full, they headed off. Bags overflowing with new items, ones they needed, a lot they didn't. Kimiko took no time at all to complain, dropping her load off on Kaizen or Ethan, starting under the guise of a duel. Battles continued until she was free of her luggage, the boys eventually took everything off her to stop the rampage. The path was long, an ever-changing forest road. It was wide, open, easily travelled compared to previous routes, fewer trees covered the sky as it faded from day to night. They carried onward, kaizen's golden flames lighting their way in short bursts, burning in the palm of his hand.

They walked half the night, settling once they found a suitable spot. The campfire started, food cooked overtop, Ethan the only one tending to it. He didn't mind; each attempt was another chance to improve his skill. Something he knew he'd likely not do after this journey ended. The night was uneventful, they ate, slept, then rushed to the road. Ethan enjoyed this part of the forest, it was warmer, calm, the journey pleasant. His new sketchpad was filled with anything that took his fancy. The group stopped to let him draw things out, Kaizen joined in, oftentimes doodling next to Ethan's more refined sketches.

While Ethan enjoyed a relaxed evening, tending to another campfire, preparing their dinner, his party shared a knowing look, one leaving for a quick scout of the area. Ethan relished the smells, the dented pot bubbling above the blaze. Kaizen sat beside him; their stuff prepped for another night under the stars. The moment he claimed the meal was done, Ethan could swear he heard someone yell. He looked around, confused, Kaizen unphased while pulling a piece of meat out of the pot. Kimiko returned swiftly after; arms stretched, oddly pleased with herself. **"Was someone out there?"** Ethan asked. Kimiko shrugged, taking a seat beside her companions, immediately stuffing her face as she snatched the pot. The coming day carried a strange air, Kaizen and Kimiko whispered among themselves, one of them would always disappear come night.

After some strange evenings, things simmered down. Kimiko returned to causing trouble for the other two. Complaints, impromptu duels, disappearing anytime she found something of intrigue, hanging off either of them when lazy, stealing Ethan's belongings. It all became a bit too tiring for the boys. Kaizen dealt with it as best he could, while Ethan ignored her entirely. They carried along a faded path, a cliff edge to one side, a deep drop, pink flowers lined every visible part of the forest floor, trees towering overhead, bark vibrant red. Leaves orange, tinted in yellow along the edge. Ethan couldn't contain his excitement, examining everything up close, sketching parts, he pinched a leaf, throwing it in the book's paper. The cliff oversaw a small town, large stone roads trailing in and out. He could see more flowers surrounding almost every building, a sea of colour. His eagerness pulled him forward, toes hanging in the air, mouth agape, a pressure hit his back, the bushes rustled swiftly after, without a railing, he fell forward, barely tumbling off the edge before Kaizen grabbed the back of his shirt. **"Careful"**

"Sorry." He regained his footing, hand loosely rubbing the back of his head, blaming his own stupidity, or the possibility Kimiko had knocked him on purpose for her amusement. He shot her a glance; she seemed distracted, facing the way they came. **"What town is that?"** Ethan asked.

"That one? Hm... I don't know actually. You know what town that is?" He looked Kimiko's way; unbothered by the view.

"Nope. No idea" she yawned, arms outstretched, the group had slowed. She leisurely wandered back, tilting against Kaizen while the two both peered over the edge. Everything looked pristine, though from a

distance it was hard to tell. **"We taking a look?"** Kimiko asked, now leaning almost all her weight against the man beside her. With all three standing in a small space the ground began to shift, groan, it crumbled. Kaizen was pulled down fast, Kimiko hung from the edge, letting him fall by himself. Ethan was to his side, scarcely hanging onto the edge himself. The cliff face brittle, he fell next. Kimiko in her infinite wisdom decided she didn't want to walk down by herself, her hands flexed, fingers outstretched, following gravity's whims. Kaizen's back erupted, two wings sprawled out in seconds, he slowed his descent, catching Ethan before he passed him. He held his arm out for Kimiko, she grabbed hold easily, as though they'd done this before. They drifted to the bottom, feet touching the safety of soft grass. A few pink flowers crushed underfoot.

"I guess we're looking anyway" Kaizen rubbed the back of his neck, his wings disappearing to nothing. He stretched himself out before walking forward. Kimiko followed suit, while Ethan halted a moment. One of the bags he had been holding had fallen off. He ran over to pick it up, happy it was filled with nothing breakable. As he scooped it up, his fingers grazed the nearby flowers. He felt...weird. His skin was tingling in a way he didn't like. He swiftly snatched the bag, chasing after his friends.

The town itself was indeed spotless, everything looked recently built, no imperfections no matter where you looked. The houses were small; made from red logs. The flowers were overwhelming, growing along vines scattered along every surface. Small baskets littered the streets decorating the outside of houses, lamps, chairs, tables, every inch of this town looked cozy, intimate, as though everyone who lived here was happy to let each other wander in and out of their homes.

But....

They hadn't seen anyone. The longer they looked, the more confused they became. Houses looked lived in, yet they couldn't find a soul. Ethan could have sworn he tripped over something only to see nothing in his path. Things thought interactive were strangely static. A thin film of some kind had settled on multiple exteriors. They entered another building; Ethan spotted a small wooden toy on the floor. He leaned down, curiously trying to pick it up. His eyes widened, blood went cold, a strange feeling washed over him. He'd phased right through it, no matter how much he moved his fingers, there was nothing tangible. Like the woman he'd seen. **"An illusion?"** he asked.

"Maybe" Kimiko yawned for a second time behind them. She leaned against the wall, her eyes half closed, shoulders brushing against pink flowers.

"...We should probably head off." Kaizen lightly grabbed Kimiko's arm, pulling her out the door. Ethan followed suit.

The streets had become foggy, easily turning the streets into a maze, filled with a sweet scent. Kimiko had begun to tire more, yawning more frequently. Kaizen felt the same. Meanwhile Ethan was perfectly fine. They turned another corner, reaching a building they'd already been in, Kimiko leaned all her weight against Kaizen. She fell asleep in seconds. Leaving him to pick her up.

Their pace slowed significantly, reaching the same house again and again. Kaizen yawned, his every step growing more sluggish. As they reached the same point once again, Ethan stopped. Something was off, this time it felt like the building they'd typically turn at was earlier than the time prior. He turned to his companion. **"Can you check from above?"**

Kaizen shrugged, he lowered Kimiko, Ethan taking over. Kaizen's legs bent, his arms raised, as they swung down the ground cracked beneath him. He shot upwards, piercing the fog with one sharp movement. With him out of sight Ethan noticed movement, the vines across the edge of the buildings stirred. They groaned, wept, wailed.

From above Kaizen watched the streets below, the fog only touching the tops of the houses. He stared intently at them, until gravity reclaimed him. He landed directly on a mass of vines; flowers covered his feet. A wave of fatigue shot through him, the flowers grew, pollen radiated from them, the fog thickening. The ground around them rippled, cracks appearing then disappearing swiftly. The buildings in ruin, pots

broken, windows long missing. It all returned to that pristine appearance. The panic began as vines continued to grow, he attempted to pull one off, but another replaced it. Ethan raised one hand, a glowing blue striking the vines beginning to encase his friend. **“LET HIM GO!”**

The light burned away upon contact. Instantaneously turning each flower to dust. It was as though both cancelled each other out. Kaizen fell to his side, scales seeping along his arms, his breath heavy, ragged. **“Kaizen!”** Ethan shook one shoulder. Kaizen’s limbs didn’t want to move, he was tired, the magic he used to maintain this form becoming a burden. He glanced Ethan’s way, the horror on this kid’s face made him feel almost guilty. **“Get up!”** Ethan called for him again. Kaizen’s arms tensed, he tried to push himself back up, as his chest lifted flowers grew beneath him. They curved around his arms, his legs, faster than Ethan could shake them off. He inhaled, petals flew upward, pulled from their stems, Ethan jumped back as the heat that came after burned a large chunk of the ones surrounding his arms. It wasn’t enough, all his energy drained, he felt his eyes close, the tension of his magic was slipping away, his body increasing in size, his horns showed first, wings soon after. Vines snapped, unable to keep up. His clothing torn to shreds in mere moments as he took his initial shape. His neck long, arms scaly, claws at the tips, large protruding scales covered his back, glinting gold. **“Woah...”** as his tail came Ethan’s way he resorted to running, Kimiko on his back, Kaizen’s dragon form overtook the street, the mere size of him cracking the buildings. The road not wide enough. Flowers continued to spiral around him, locking him in place, he looked no more than a mound of pink and green. **“KAIZEN!”** Ethan put Kimiko down, he tried again, bare hands pulling at flowers, his palms blue. It was a losing battle. The ones within his grasp faded to nothing, but new ones grew in their place. His light flickered between contact.

He felt the panic overtake him as he turned back, Kimiko was gone. A mass of pink where she lay. His eyes wide, heart racing, breath struggling, chest tight, the edge of his lips quivered. *What do I do? What do I do?!* He ran her way, petals danced in the air, furiously pulled from their base as Ethan’s arms flailed, the sweat dripping down his face. Why was this only affecting them? **“No... no no, this can’t be real.”** His voice shook.

As his gaze darted between his friends, he noticed movement. People, their form flickering, leisurely walking the streets. They entered houses, talked without words, all of them a mix of races Ethan rarely saw in one place. A few he’d never seen, ones with larger builds, tusks, all walking around as though this was just another normal day, none took notice of the giant creature taking up so much space, the vines, his cries for help. Among them were a strange pair of eyes, watching him intently, another seemed further off, less malicious in nature, but still there. A gust of wind flew his way, almost knocking him off his feet.

Everything overwhelmed him, he felt like he was spinning in circles, blue seeping off his shoulders. He could feel that pressure build in his chest, that imminent explosion of his own making. Push it down, quell it, now isn’t the time. His eyes snapped shut, he couldn’t pass out here. If he did, he couldn’t help his friends. Sparks of blue flickered in his hair. He clenched his fists, muscles tense.

“What am I supposed to do?”

Chapter 7

“E...than. Run.” Kaizen’s voice was unsteady, tired, but it echoed loudly. A dragon’s whisper still booming.

The boy opened his eyes wide. One hand stretched outward. If he could just get Kaizen up. He took one breath in, other arm raised, both steady. Hands stretched, palms forward. The pressure spread through his shoulders, trailed down his biceps, his forearms, to the tips of his fingers. It shot out in one swift wave, condensed, a semi-circle of blue washed over everything. Every plant touched, withered to nothing. His light sparking as it too fizzled on contact. The illusion covering the ground faded away, revealing cracks, broken pots, ruined buildings. Kaizen was almost entirely unconstrained, enough that his eyes opened

once again. A wing slid atop the other two like a blanket. He inhaled, the air hot, the blaze that came from it was thrice the size of his previous attempt, the flowers burned away in mass, leaving him free from their hold. The sheer heat caused Ethan to sweat; he'd have vaporised if it hadn't been for the wing overhead sheltering them from its full force. The fire lingered, the flowers kept at bay, unable to creep in further. His head struggled to stay upright, getting up was trickier as he rolled to one side. The ground shuddered under his weight, sounds of rubble crashing, heard in the distance, yet all buildings looked pristine.

Ethan fell to his knees, awake, okay. His hands landed in his lap, content for now. Kaizen tiredly glanced his way, head resting on the ground, surrounded by charred petals and ash. The heat had shrivelled what remained of the nearby flora, revealing Kimiko, who lay in silence, unmoving.

Kaizen's tail curled around her, protective. He lightly pushed her closer to Ethan, his body coiled around them, a hint of safety. Ethan despite his own fatigue crawled Kimiko's way, he carefully scooped her in his arms, pulling her upper body from the floor, he brushed off dead petals, vines, releasing her from any binds. She was breathing, weakly. Exhausted, her eyes sunken. Skin pale, cold, despite the warm flames. Kaizen didn't look great either, though it was harder to tell. **"What are these things?"** Ethan asked.

"I don't know... but I'm not willing... to stick around to find out." He aimed to stand, struggling, he fell. The ground cracked further. Ethan fell over as the earth trembled. Kimiko limply lay on top of him. **"...I can't move."** Kaizen sighed. **"I can't change my form either."**

The boy cross legged, cautiously rolling Kimiko over his legs, he felt light headed, too much aura used at once, but not enough that he was immobilized. He carefully dragged Kimiko to Kaizen's side, resting her beside him. He then shuffled through their belongings, a few clothes thrown over her, while the bag rested under her head. His cloak was thrown over top. He looked to his giant friend, struggling to see his full face. **"Are you okay?"** he asked.

"Mm. It feels like someone drained all my energy." He groaned. He was listless, his eyes closing periodically, swiftly startling open at short intervals. **"You?"** he asked back.

Ethan smiled, worn. **"I'll be normal in a few minutes."**

"...I'm sorry you got caught up in this. I should've noticed something was off earlier."

"I mean flowers ARE well known for being super dangerous." The boy teased as he used Kaizen's form to stand himself back up, the large frame obscured everything on the other side. The realisation of how much volume this man took up was shocking. **"Is...this your real size?"** he asked.

Kaizen chuckled weakly. **"Yep. This is me... ta da"**

His scales were incredibly shiny, iridescent, each one carried Ethan's reflection as he came close, small chunks had holes or cracks, revealing flesh underneath. The scales protruding from his back were thrice the length of his others, trailing down his spine until they petered off to merge with his tail. The gaps of missing tissue along his wings were more apparent at this size. **"I never knew you were this big"**

"Haha. Thanks?" Kaizen chuckled again.

"You know what I mean." He rubbed the back of his head, cheeks red. **"Sorry, I'm just going to have a look on the other side."** The scales provided a useful foothold as he climbed onto his back.

“Careful” Kaizen’s voice created a body wide ripple. It was impressive, yet a bit intimidating.

With a better view, he could see where the flowers stopped, a burned edge kept them at bay. Same with the other side. The buildings were in ruin, but only in their general area, the ground covered in large cracks, broken pots, doors, walls. Further down the street where the fog lingered, he could see movement. Those strange glints of people, they had no feet, barely retaining any semblance of form. **“Whatever that was, it calmed down. No idea how long that’ll last.”** He waited for a response, Kaizen was silent. His breath steady, deep. Exhaustion had taken over. Ethan slid down cautiously. Kimiko remained unchanged. Wind picked up again, strong, but Kaizen’s frame sheltered them both.

You’re ruining everything!

A sharp voice trailed through the air. All fell still swiftly. With a bit of hesitation Ethan rummaged through the bag Kimiko rested her head on, cautiously lifting it from under her, taking out his pole. He returned her pillow before judiciously sneaking a peak, opting to walk around the giant tail. The street was untouched; flickering figures took more shapes. One caught his attention, small, floating, staring back. A chill ran down his spine, the bloodthirst reminiscent of someone he’d prefer to avoid. The flowers kept the line, refusing to near the flames that lingered. A beautiful gold dancing among the pink. They feared it, but only while it burned.

Ethan inched forward. Weapon ready, body nimble, palms blue. Gaze sharp, lip upturned. A gentle hum graced his ear. Each step brought new features to view. Vibrant pink petals pulled in a ponytail, a green stem shaped like a small boy, pink wings furiously beating in a steady pattern. All barely larger than Ethan’s hand. A cold breeze circled them, pollen in large quantities spiraled in the air. *Get out.*

Ethan flinched, the malice heavy, a lump in his throat. Such a tiny creature had so much hatred at one merely existing in its space. He felt a twinge of guilt, familiar, frustrating. **“I-I will...but...”** his words came out stuttered, broken. He tightened his grip on his weapon, taking one big breath through his nose, the scent of flowers overwhelming. **“I’m only leaving with my friends.”**

You don’t make demands. You bend to mine. Their voice echoed through the street, carried by a cold wind that cut through the lingering heat like a blade.

“I won’t leave my friends.” Ethan growled. Arms shaking, resolve clear.

It scoffed at him, the plants writhed. *You WILL leave. Or be stolen by my god’s endless greed.* A stub of an arm raised, plant life flourished desperately trying to inch forward regardless of flame. Ethan stood ready, wary. Body shaking, hands unsteady, legs screaming to flee, heart in his throat. Sweat lined his brow. This thing mocked him, it laughed uncontrollably. *Now you know true fear. Foolish child.*

Fear. Right, he was terrified, the mass of energy that came from this thing in front of him, no matter how small, was stronger than him. He inched forward, the plants climbing ever higher. Ethan closed his eyes, recalling his father’s murderous gaze, his strength. **“It isn’t as bad as his.”** One deep breath in, pole gripped tight, it spun on his exhale. Blue engulfing the ends. If this thing was a step down from fighting *HIM*, then he wanted to win. A nervous smile crept across his face, arms at the ready, a foot came forward, with one sharp swing, he slashed at his opponent, a scythe-like blade extending outward past the flames. Cut at the stem, every petal turned to ash. His own light vanished on touch, another hour of life gone in an instant.

The surroundings wavered, another building wrecked, figures disappearing, ground uneven. An unearthly howl painfully hammered into his skull, the plants regrew, parts of town vanished with each new bud. Ethan shifted his weight forward, another swipe, the blade renewed, more life spent. Petals danced in the wind. His feet off the ground, a gust struck his side, throwing him across the road, he bounced once smashing into a nearby wall. Pain rippled from back to fingertip; the pole slipped from his hand. Feet falling to the floor.

Teeth grit, he spun his weapon, gripping it tightly again. **“Is that all?”**

Another gust, his hair floated backward, he rolled to the side, dodging just. Another flew at him, the pole was slammed into the ground between two cracked stones. Hold strong, able to keep himself grounded as the threat passed. Its intensity was like a blade, cutting his forearm, and tearing at his shirt. He pulled the weapon from its hold, sprinting closer. It glowed brightly; he swung it across the flames once again. Contact. The flowers fell first, blade rebuilding itself. A violent ear-piercing screech emanated from it. Ethan’s hearing became a buzz, head throbbing. They collided with the floor, blade atop them as they squirmed below. His weapon flickered, but he refused to let go. Watching his aura burn away by the flowers furiously growing around them.

“If you just let us leave then we can stop.” He growled.

NO! A gust flew at him, throwing Ethan off balance. He lifted skyward; blue sputtered to nothing. His stamina drained fast, brazenly using his ability more than he was used to, yet a part of him felt alive, strong, free. He kicked his legs, spinning himself around, the pole digging into the ground again. He swiftly returned to his feet. *You’re persistent. Just leave the big one. I’ll let you go.*

“You can’t have either of them.” Ethan snapped back. The golden flame was so small, barely a whimper of its former glory. The street fared no better, new cracks, rubble, buildings all losing their pristine appearance. One house was split in half, part of it in ruin, while the rest was without flaw. Ethan struck again, he swung with ferocity, the blue light thicker, larger, wider with each strike, it burned away effortlessly against the horde of flowers, chipping away at him yet he felt better, his body was lighter, he could swing quicker, run faster. The adrenaline was kicking ever more as the flames dwindled to nothing.

Being the last line of defence was daunting; flowers grew around him. *Swing.* Another minute gone; they’d rise up to the side like a wave. *Swing;* he’d lost an hour. How much time had he burned away keeping the line? Sweat lined his brow, fear chipped at his soul, yet the sheer sensation of a good fight kept him going, he could win. *Did it matter how?* Another swing, the opponent forced back, *again. Again. AGAIN.*

His eyes wide, reminiscent of a certain someone he’d tried to forget, he mimicked his bloodthirst, his blank stare haunting. The pixie faltered, its bravado faded much like the town surrounding them both. More ruins, destruction, dust, weeds. Ethan barely noticed that so little of the street retained its previous shape. The focus so intense, nothing else mattered. He spun his staff, blue shimmering in the motion. He aimed to swing again, blade at the end no longer dull. The panic of his opponent an achievement. The pixie closed its eyes, arms outstretched, body shielding the last building on their block, only one wall unblemished, worn from age, yet still standing strong. A creaky wooden chair on its porch, it looked well cared for, yet it didn’t flicker.

Ethan's staff stopped shy of the pixie's throat. "...**that's what's going on.**" He whispered. Frowning, he braced as another gust flew his way. He was unphased, the wind mild, barely nudging him. The more energy this pixie used, the less the illusion remained, more ruins, craters, damage, burns, destruction....

Bones.

Ethan's eyes widened. They were strewn all over the place, in broken chairs, laying over the walls, across the ground, half buried under rubble. He couldn't tear his eyes away. "**DON'T LOOK!**" The pixie yelled, its own voice this time, small, pained. "**Don't look at them!**" It wailed, barely audible despite the yelling. It tried to block Ethan's gaze with its tiny frame. An impossible task.

The boy could feel a part of him weep; it was painful, reminiscent of the night he spent under the twin moons. That ache that tormented him even to this day, even if dulled. His gaze pulled to his friends. They were precious, he knew part of that was misguided, they still hid so much, purposefully or not.

After some hesitation, he turned back. Palms blue, one placed on the ground, the odd gust of wind desperately trying to shake him. He ignored it. He exhaled deeply, joints loose, fingers touching stone, *what was just a little bit more?* Blue swept the ground like a blanket, silently, it crept across the walls, the cracks filled with a vibrant glow. It returned the visual he'd seen prior. The pixie was speechless, watching a lively vibrant blue encase a moment in time. It lasted only a moment before vanishing. Ethan felt the strain, everything came back to him like it was supposed to, but the fight had him spent. Limbs ached, body throbbing, he felt like part of him was missing, gone, his arms wouldn't move. The world was spinning, stopped only by the floor in a few short moments.

His vision blurred, strange shapes and colours spanning his gaze. That quiet voice was so close to his ear, but he couldn't understand it. He felt his eyes close, a light pressure touched his chest, he felt warm, alert. His eyes snapped open, heavy gasps followed as he realized he had stopped breathing through it all. The pixie sat atop him, such a tiny individual that had felled a dragon on their own.

Ethan attempted to move, his body failed him, he was awake, but that was all. "**You understand,**" the pixie said. "**If I had just the big one, it'd be restored.**"

Ethan watched them, he frowned. Longing for something that wouldn't come to pass, was a fool's errand. But... They were sitting in the same boat. "...**it wouldn't be real.**" He spoke in a quiet tone. The pixie flopped onto the ground beside him, exhausted. "**It's beautiful. I'm sorry I couldn't see it when it was the way you remember.**" Ethan said.

Subtle noises came from the pixie's location, Ethan couldn't shift his head to look at them, he merely waited. The coming silence was filled with tiny sniffles, this poor small soul was struggling all by itself, stifling its own sobs. Ethan gave him company, the same as Kaizen did for him, waiting it out. He struggled to remain conscious after a while; body screaming for rest. He felt himself drifting off, though movement pulled him back.

"If I could take even a fraction of yours, I could show you what it was like."

Ethan had no idea what they were talking about. He was immune to their flowers. They didn't affect him. Even if he offered, it'd do nothing. *Wait.* His train of thought paused. A fraction of his energy would be enough? That couldn't be right. "**I'd give it, but your flowers don't work on me.**" He chuckled awkwardly.

A light pressure touched his chest again. **"I can take it from the source."**

There was no fanfare, no immediate greed. They gave him a choice this time. Ethan's gaze shifted to his friends. Then to the sky. **"From the source... you mean my aura, right? The blue stuff."** The pixie was barely in view; he could see a nod. **"...That's my life. Every time I use it, and can't pull it back, I lose time. If you took it directly, I don't know how much I'd have left."** *Not that it matters.* A passing thought.

"I know. There was an elf like you who lived here."

The fatigue melted away. *A high elf lived here?* He attempted to sit up, his arms burned, tension made them shake, the struggles of gravity dragging them down.

"I wouldn't need more than you used in our fight. It's so condensed"

Ethan contemplated it, it seemed like a waste using it all for one moment, yet he'd done that through the past year. Mindlessly throwing it away at times. He couldn't trust this pixie to only take a little, they'd almost killed his friends, they'd killed before, bones littered the streets. But he wanted to think they were good deep down, they spent all this time maintaining a dead town. He opened his mouth, unsure what to say. **"Okay"** His body tensed a moment, he hadn't said that. He thought it, but something else pushed that word out of his mouth.

He felt that pressure accumulate in his chest, something was pulling at it uncomfortably. **"Thank you"** the malice was gone, replaced by a sweet, innocent tone. Ethan's eyes felt heavy again, it hurt, a sharp painful sting deep in his chest that felt like his soul was being ripped asunder. He stifled a yell, forcing himself to grin and bear it. **"You have to offer it. Or it'll be painful"**

"...Offer it?" Ethan asked through gritted teeth.

"Send it to me."

He closed both eyes, the pain worsening a moment. He could feel that pull, he tried to relax, impossible, the ache persisted. The pull intensified, the pain overwhelming. He flinched, a yell escaped, stifled swiftly as Ethan his body tensed. *Send it, how?* He focused on the pull, was he supposed to push it that way? He couldn't visualize it, the pain was in the way, the only thing he could think of was the butterfly. That one thing that held so much comfort. Slowly moving in the direction of the pain, the sting lightened. One butterfly became two, four, eight. They merged into what looked like a steady stream. The pain relented, though he felt more exhausted than before.

A wind picked him up, gently raising his upper body, his head forward. Buildings slowly built up around them, tinted in blue, pots filled to the brim with flowers, banners hanging from walls, symbols Ethan didn't recognise covered nearly every surface. There was more than before. People lined the streets, laughing, children running, so many races in one place. Petals danced in the wind, carried with noise, laughter, greetings, gossip. So many voices all at once, all living their day to day. They greeted the pixie as they passed, nothing could mistake that genuine smile.

"...I won't forget this." They whispered.

The sensation came to a halt, the wind slowed, lowering him to the ground. Eyelids heavy, a sweet scent of flowers filled the air, his body more than tired. A figure stood above him, ears pointed, long robes. The pixie at their side. His mind drifted, with no qualms, he let sleep take him.

“Oi. OIIIIIIII Sleepy head!”

Tap. tap. tap. A foot continuously hit the cracked path.

“Maybe he’s dead. ““You aren’t being helpful.”

“Neither are you, why were you naked this morning!?”

“...that wasn’t my fault. I didn’t intend on falling asleep.”

“Yeah well, next time take your clothes off first. We’re gonna run out.”

Poke

“Ethan? Can you hear me?” “Just leave him. We’ll pick him up later.”

“...He’s the reason you’re not dead. You better thank him.” One could almost hear the eyeroll.

A quiet moan escaped his lips, the light of morning overpowering. The first sight of the day was a pair of legs. He groaned again, every muscle ached terribly, he felt hot, strained, his throat rough, dry. He awkwardly sat up, the smell of the morning dew pleasant. **“Aye, there we go.”** A hand lightly gripped his arm, he felt the ground leave him, somehow, he was on his feet, he wobbled, wishing he could sit back down. Another hand grabbed the other side. Slender, firm, annoyed. He tiredly glanced their way, darker blue, yellow, perked ears, a scowl on her face. **“Can we go now?”** that shrill annoying voice complaining so loudly.

“Probably for the best. We’ve lost a bit of time here.”

Ethan waited for coherency, he felt like he’d slept way too long, desperately craving a good stretch. He managed to gain balance, pulling both arms from his companions. He put his hands skyward, his back arched, legs tensed, body balanced on his toes. He let out a large yawn, everything coming back to view like normal, the street was barren, filled with cracks, craters, rubble. Flowers at the edge, unchanged. They were alone, just them three, like it’d been when they arrived. No fog. They had no struggles leaving, arriving at the end of the path.

The field was brimming in pink, Kaizen took in a deep breath, the smell of fire culminating in the back of his throat. **“Wait!”** Ethan raised both hands, **“I think we should leave them.”** He said quietly. Kaizen raised an eyebrow. The flames dimmed to nothing, a smoke effortlessly coming from the edge of his mouth. The scent overwhelming as Ethan covered his nose.

“...they’re dangerous.”

“I know. But I don’t think they’ll hurt anyone else.” Kaizen looked unsure. **“Please.”** Ethan lightly gripped his arm, fidgeting while he kept his gaze locked on Kaizen’s.

The dragon sighed, thick black smoke exhaled, he looked back at the field, Scowling. Kimiko seemed to care less, ignorant of the conversational topic. **"If you're sure."** The two exchanged a smile, that looming walk made Kaizen uncomfortable. **"We're going to do this the faster way"** He grinned a moment, Kimiko braced herself, while Ethan stood in confusion. He scooped up the two, and with one kick they were midair, soaring above the field below. Kimiko unphased, Ethan revelling in the view, the sun barely peaking over the ruins of the town they'd come from.

The return to the usual path was relaxing, the trio wary. Kimiko oddly quiet, her feet scuffing every odd step, leaves brushed to the side as she wobbled. Kaizen yawned furiously, fearing no better, any minor obstacle sent him forward, colliding with trees, hills, Ethan, Kimiko, a rock. Neither one could form a sentence, barely moving forward. All their vigour gone, the lingering effects clearly evident. Ethan stood in front, he had no idea where they were going, so they couldn't make much progress until at least one of the two could string a thought together. **"Should we take a break?"** he asked. Kimiko groaned in his general direction; she fell face first on the ground. Kaizen stumbled into a nearby tree **"...I'll take that as a yes."**

A crackle of burning wood aided the fatigue as Kimiko sat in front of the fire, head dipping, eyes closing. Beside her, was Kaizen. Her pillow as she leaned her weight against him. The man's form was still beastlike, barely retaining human features as he struggled to keep himself alert. A lollipop stick hung from his mouth, the rush of its effects the only thing keeping him going for now. There was no breeze, the sun hid cautiously behind thick grey clouds.

A rustle came from the bushes nearby, twigs crushed underfoot. Ethan grinned, food in hand as he'd found an assortment of forageables in the area. Kaizen perked up at another smell as Ethan passed. Strapped to his back was a small boar, one clean cut being its downfall. He watched the boy waste no time in preparing it. As to not feel like a complete burden, Kaizen gently lay Kimiko down, quietly hobbling over to his companion, a smile on his face. **"Need a hand?"** he asked tiredly.

"Nah I got it. You can relax for a change." He used a small chipped blade, with a blue edge. It made swift work of the creature, though Kaizen felt uneasy seeing him use his aura so readily.

"Shouldn't you conserve it? After-"

"I'm okay." Ethan focused, barely struggling as he pulled the pelt from his catch. He gutted, cleaned and sectioned everything. **"Believe it or not, I feel...lighter. Better. I don't really know why."**

Kaizen picked up a knife, he knew what Ethan was doing, and he hated being completely useless, so he began whittling a nearby branch. **"Just don't overdo it. Okay?"** The branch snapped.

"Yeah. I know." Ethan quietly continued his work, content. Meanwhile Kaizen's second attempt fared no better. The third finally made progress. He removed the bark, cleaning it off enough that they could skewer the meat on it above the flame.

The two boys worked in silence, the fire was fed, meat atop the growing flames, smaller sticks nearby to cook a few mushrooms he'd found earlier. While they watched the meat, Kaizen fiddled with a leftover piece of wood, tentatively pulling bits of it off as he lost himself in thought. He'd glance at Ethan, then away. Wood groaned in his hands; The young boy began to tire of it. He let out a loud sigh, turning to him. **"What is it?"** he asked brazenly.

This caught the dragon off guard, flustered. He dropped the wood, carefully taking a breath in. **"Thanks. For what you did. I know...you probably spent more time than you should have because I wasn't paying enough attention."**

Ethan leaned back, his arms taking the brunt of his weight. He felt like he'd learned something precious, yet strangely horrifying at the same time. Even without that, the price had been worth it. **"You guys put your life on the line for me all the time. It's only fair."**

"...Yeah but"

"Friends depend on each other, right?" He took in the savoury aroma as the mushrooms sizzled over the fire. The meat dripped with a tantalising scent of its own. **"I'm happy I could help,"** he said with a smile. Nothing could take away that little bit of pride he held for being able to defend his friends. He knew Kimiko would never thank him for doing so, but he'd rub it in her face at some point to make up for it.

Kaizen smiled loosely, he looked back to his hands, mind a blur with fatigue, he looked like he wanted to say something, but gave up on it. Ethan focused on his tasks, gleefully spinning their food to get an even cook. He hung the pelt up after a short time, hoping to craft something out of it later if they picked up a needle and thread. Kaizen continued to watch his every move, his mouth constantly opening to say something, only to catch midway. He raised his hands, both palms made contact with his cheeks, a thunderous hollow thwap echoed through their camp. Kimiko groaned while rolling over, rambling a little before another snore escaped.

Ethan had almost fallen over, his back to the noise that'd struck so suddenly. As he returned his gaze Kaizen's way, the man looked a bit more held together. **"I want to talk to you about something important."** He said quietly, a clawed hand gently patting the ground beside him.

Both boys sat across from the other, Ethan's gaze split between their food presently cooking, and Kaizen who had a strangely serious expression. **"There's...a couple of things I want to say."** The dragon's tail swayed nervously; a hand lightly rubbed the back of his head. **"I don't really admit it, but I'm pretty strong."** Ethan looked unimpressed, giving off *'Are you being serious right now?'* energy in the boldest way. **"I'm getting somewhere. Geez. You're taking after Kimiko more every day."** He took in a deep breath, a little lighter on exhale. **"I'm not used to having to be protected. That's my job you know? I guess I just... feel bad that I put you in that position."**

"I appreciate what you guys do for me. I wouldn't be where I am without it ... but" Ethan held a palm out, his fingers tinted blue, a small butterfly slowly rising from the centre of his hand. **"I already decided when I started this journey that whatever came of it, well...I guess that's more than I thought I'd get. If I died out here protecting a friend, I don't think I'd feel like it was a waste."**

Kaizen frowned. **"Ethan...you really should value your own life more. You're- "**

"I know. And I wish you'd told me you knew the whole story earlier. "

Kaizen's body shrunk, head lowered, legs pulled toward his chest **"...I'm sorry. I got asked to make sure you were okay. So, I did, but I still had a job, and you wanted to go your own way...so."**

Asked? Ethan could feel his heart ache, but he tried to ignore it. **"You sent me to Kimiko. I take it you regret that now?"**

“A little. “The pair shared a chuckle; Kaizen relaxed a smidge. **“When did you realize I knew?”** he asked cautiously.

“Hm. Well, you knew what using my aura meant and you weren’t phased by me having it in the first place. You encouraged me to go home again at some point, and you knew who the elves trying to catch me were.”

Kaizen flinched. **“...when you put it like that, it sounds like I’m not great at hiding things.”**

“You’re really not.” Ethan laughed, he picked the mushrooms off the fire, setting them to the side. He turned the meat again before returning. **“You get pouty, kind of like Kimiko when you’re hiding something. You guys did it when you knew about my dad...”** his happy demeanour faded, that thought lingering. *Why do I even still call him that?* He snapped back, smile returned as he continued. **“I learned to get stronger so I can deal with those things on my own.”**

“Well, you’re doing great on that front. You’re barely the same person I met almost a year ago.”

“Thanks.” Ethan’s cheeks red, the praise a bit more than he was used to. He let it linger before his smile faltered. That word still bothered him. *Asked.* **“If you knew about the knights..., why didn’t you let them take me home?”**

Kaizen froze. He looked away, that sheepish look, tail stiff as a board. **“...uh”** he paused, struggling to figure out the words. **“You’re...I... was”**

Ethan watched him panic, the stuttering increasing as he stared him down. He knew, he didn’t have to say it. Even this. This one thing he’d achieved. Was curated by someone else. Someone he didn’t want to have a hand in it. That means he knew, he knew where he was. What he was doing. He’d assigned him a bodyguard this whole time, probably expecting him to run home in fear once he saw the real world. His body tensed, breath caught, a visible sweat down his cheek. He felt like he was choking. Kaizen noticed immediately, the panic increased. He swiftly moved to the boy’s side, one hand rubbing his back. **“Deep breaths.”** The butterfly landed on his shoulder, retaining form. Ethan shook his head. It took everything he had to gasp once, as the air got in, he could feel his chest relent. Breaths came short, slow, but eventually he felt somewhat normal. **“...I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t-”**

Ethan held his hand up, trying to quiet him. This always happened, of course even his ‘escape’ wasn’t entirely an achievement on his own. His throat stung, his lungs tense from the struggle. A few memories crossed his mind, despite the fact this started out one way, he refused to believe he’d done nothing on his own. **“It’s fine.”** his voice raspy.

“...I know it’s not.” Kaizen let out a sigh, he wrapped his arms around Ethan from behind. His head leaning against the shoulder without the butterfly. **“I wanted to tell you a long time ago. But as time went on, it got harder to say.”**

Ethan could feel that frustration build, but no aura came off his shoulders. He felt oddly in control, maybe it was the comfort this big oaf was so desperately trying to give. He knew Kaizen wasn’t a terrible person, nor was Kimiko. They had their faults, often big ones, but that didn’t take away from the things they’d done for him. He contemplated speaking, but didn’t know what to say. *Did he ask when it started, if it was still going? If he’d take him back if he was asked?*

“.... To answer your question honestly. It’s because I don’t want you to go back.” Kaizen tightened his grip on the boy, giving him a firm hug. **“If you go back. It should be on your own terms. It’s all I’d want for my family.”** His voice was shaking, nervous, strained. Something small, warm, wet hit the back of his shoulder. Ethan’s eyes grew wide, a warm breath covering half of him. *For my family.* Did that mean he saw him the same way? Was he like Ty and Kimiko? His hand lifted, fingers lightly holding Kaizen’s bare arm, glints of gold sparkling in the flame’s reflection. He leaned back; the smile returned.

He was wrong, nothing was stolen from him. He earned his place. Every part of it. **“Thank you.”** He stifled his own quaking voice.

A snuffle came from their left, both turned to see a weeping Kimiko. Her lower lip so far raised it looked comical. **“You two are such wholesome idiots.”** She wailed, her fatigue clearly affecting her mental state. Kaizen opened his arm up, inviting her in. She jumped into the fray. Pushing them over.

The moment lingered awhile, until a burnt scent ruined it all. A sudden shock to the only one known to cook. Ethan broke from the hug, swiftly wiping his own tears while hastily grabbing the food.

Their meal was jovial. Kimiko in her sleep drunken state was tolerable. Her true feelings came out once in a while. She thanked Ethan once while stuffing food in her mouth, then swiftly passed out the moment she was full. Kaizen, while tired, was more coherent, assisting in packing the camp up once everything was done. He, in his stupor, attempted to carry Kimiko, ending in the two of them hitting the floor.

Ethan took the brunt of the load after that, Kimiko on his back, their leftovers slung over one shoulder. The remainder of their bags hung from Kaizen, mostly filled with things he couldn’t break if he tripped. They walked side by side, Ethan’s mind repeating their previous conversation. He glanced at Kaizen, his focus was so set on his footsteps, mindful not to fall. He did anyway, multiple times. Each time he looked more and more tired. Yet he trudged on.

“Kaizen?” Ethan asked.

The man raised an eyebrow, warily peering his way. Hands in his pockets, a sluggish posture pulling him closer to a normal person’s height. **“Hm?”**

“While you’re tired. Will you rely on me a little more?”

Kaizen smiled faintly. **“If you’ll have me.”**

Ethan’s joy was instantaneous, grin wide. He bounced wholeheartedly in his next steps. **“In that case, those guys you kept beating up are back. There’s one over there, behind that big tree. And I saw another one heading that way about ten minutes ago. If they’re still there when we pack up for the night can I get rid of them this time?”**

They heard a clear rustle behind them. Kaizen almost fell again, this time laughing loudly. **“Sure. But only if you take a crystal with you.”**

Ethan smirked. **“I’ve already got one”** he rifled through his pocket, holding up one of the two the trio were presently carrying. Kaizen leaned his way, hand ruffling the kid’s hair with gusto.

Another long day of walking led them a little closer to their destination. Kimiko slept through most of the day, with short spurts of energy where she’d be her usual self. It lasted barely a few hours before she was

once again carried by one of the boys. Kaizen was struggling, he'd gotten taller, barely looked human, his form somewhere between the two as he waddled beside Ethan.

Just as he'd stated, Ethan was on top of everything, he scouted their campsite, caught and prepared their meals, carried most of their baggage or Kimiko. Kaizen had to withstand another night of being awake. They hadn't found a big enough space for him to sleep, during the day Ethan tried to keep him motivated. Kimiko antagonised him now that she was back on her feet. Their screaming matches did help in maintaining some level of alertness, though Ethan wished it could've been anything else. They'd summoned more damned creatures, quickly dispatched by the younger pair, it'd become a game. The two would scream at one another, something would run at them, and then Kimiko and Ethan would try to dispatch it first. Kimiko's lingering fatigue put her at a disadvantage but somehow still matched Ethan's speed. They ended in a tie.

After a long search, they saw a sight more heavenly than anything else, open space. No one could even speak before Kaizen collapsed in the middle of it, clothes strewn across the ground. His form grew exponentially until he reached his full size. Kimiko enjoyed her 'time off' kicking back with a lone bottle of wine Audrey had packed in their bag, meanwhile Ethan checked their surroundings.

He made his way around their campsite, picking up extra firewood, scaring off the same two men he'd seen the night prior. They proudly wore the serpent crest. Ethan spun his pole while walking back to camp. Kimiko was out for the night, resting against Kaizen, empty bottle in hand. Ethan walked up to them both. He pulled out a blanket, tossing it over Kimiko. He stared at Kaizen; he struggled to see his full face from this angle with his size. His breathing was loud; it was a wonder Kimiko could sleep so close by. From what he could see he looked exhausted, Ethan felt bad for him, those flowers had done so little to him in comparison. It was almost a blessing with how good he'd felt afterward. That weight on his chest, that tightness, lack of control, it all felt like it'd subsided. However, the time since he felt it returning.

His palm tinted blue, curious; he pressed it against Kaizen's scales. Eyes closed, he wanted to offer it, even just a little. But there was no pull, he could only send it to his hand, the same way he did when he'd make something. How did he make it go further? He tried to push it forward, like he would when crafting something away from himself. An illusion manifested nearby, a stream that did nothing. It was still his, still connected. He pulled it back, maybe it wasn't possible to give it like this. Kaizen would've scolded him anyway if he found out. He turned around, taking a seat nearby the two. Fire in view. He'd keep watch for the night; it was the least he could do.

The night was long, quiet, the daunting task of keeping watch a bore as Ethan found himself desperately looking for things to do. He wandered the area, cleaned some of their belongings, collected more water. In his survey he'd found eggs. He hesitantly pinched three, running away like he'd committed grand larceny. A glorious sizzle graced his ears as his prize hit the pot, a mouthwatering smell, it wafted through the camp. As he used a clean stick to poke their food, a pressure hit his back, pushing him forward. Two slender arms hung across his shoulders, stretching out. **"Oooh"** a gleeful tone in his ear. **"You found eggs?"** she continued, her weight pushing him toward their food, he steeled himself halting the descent midway.

"Morning." He gave a smile;

Kimiko returned the sentiment while pulling herself back. She crouched beside him, eyeing their meal. **“I knew a nerd like you would enjoy responsibility.”** She teased.

Ethan shrugged; she wasn't wrong. He'd enjoyed it, despite his struggles of boredom the quiet had been nice. **“Look at you becoming a proper functioning adult.”** She flicked his cheek, the smug look made Ethan's eyes roll.

He batted her hand away. **“Look if you keep teasing me, I'll eat these myself.”** he gave his own smirk, it didn't take long to realize his mistake. Kimiko's expression grew sinister, she snatched the pot, fleeing with all three. Ethan chased after her, swiping at the pot handle. She spun around him, mocking his attempts by eating one of the eggs.

“Nice try~” she hummed, keeping the handle away from him. Ethan jumped for it, his fingers grazing it before she snatched it away. She pinched another egg, gleefully purring as she ate it. **“So good!”** Ethan's palms shone blue; he aimed for it again. She spun. As she picked up the last one, a blue loop circled it, pulling it from her fingers. Both of them stood in shock as Ethan caught it. She took a step his way, in panic he stuffed the egg in his mouth, he wasn't losing the last one. The two of them laughed at one another, it was good fun until Ethan started choking.

While he coughed loudly, Kimiko hit his back hard, the food went down awkwardly, his voice hoarse. **“You're supposed to enjoy it when you win, idiot.”** She chuckled.

Ethan glared at her. **“I would've if I didn't think you'd steal it from me.”** He spat out. His body lurched forward, coughing again, hand on his chest.

Kimiko left his side, quietly packing up their belongings. It surprised him, mouth agape, eyes wide. She threw a bag she was holding which hit him square in the face. **“If you're just going to gawk, then wake up the other idiot”**

Ethan did as he was asked, but the task was easier said than done. Attempt number one was calling his name. His voice wasn't any louder than this giant beast's breaths. Attempt two was to shake him, obviously he didn't have the strength for that. He paced; how did one normally wake a dragon. As he pondered the idea, Kimiko rolled her eyes, she grabbed a pile of leaves, briskly walking up to him. She waited till he inhaled, shoving them right up his nose. It took a moment, Kaizen twitched, his snout jiggled as he began inhaling more. Kimiko stepped to the side, grabbing hold of one of his scales. With one large inhale it all came out as a massive sneeze. Leaves flew overhead, Ethan was thrown off his feet, the campfire lost not just flame, but the rocks at its base and any charred wood. Kimiko waited for a familiar snuffle, unphased. **“Get up.”** She poked him in the eye as it opened. He recoiled, his body shrinking swiftly. A clawed hand covered half his face, turning to fleshy fingers, the scales long vanished. His wings remained. He yawned loudly; arms outstretched as he lengthened himself out. Clothes were thrown at him next. **“Let's go!”** she chirped happily, passing Ethan who hung upside down from a nearby tree.

The walk was lively, with a bit more vigour after a good night's sleep. For the first time in a while, the path was clear, carts crossed by more than once. Small villages scattered the area, hidden among the trees. Kimiko watched her companions, the boredom clearly settling in with a fury. She had more energy than she knew what to do with. It started with a flick to the back of Ethan's head; he face planted as her foot became outstretched. After an hour or two of minor jabs in his side, teasing, and general annoyances, he'd well and truly had enough, ears red as she continued to test his composure. Finally, it calmed, she eyed him cautiously, waiting until the perfect moment. Kaizen tripped, fourth time in an hour, he bumped

into Ethan. Just as they made contact, she threw herself at Ethan's other side, squishing him between the two. He made an inhuman sound as he lost all air. She laughed loudly, quickly moving out of the way as Ethan's arm swung in her direction. She threw her hands behind her head, upper body leaning backwards. Ethan swung again, a near miss, he'd felt her hair graze his fingers. She lifted an elbow, hitting him in the chin. He staggered back, a fire in his eyes, he jumped at her, making contact this time, they both scuffled on the floor like children, though Ethan was on the losing side.

They rolled along the ground, followed by Kaizen, too tired to put a stop to it. It didn't take long until both trundled off the path and down a sudden drop.

SPLASH

Ethan sat himself on the water's edge, hair dripping, cloak hanging nearby. The sun was high, creating a beautiful reflection on the running water. Surrounded by thick greenery. Roots of the nearby trees scattered the bank. Kimiko took off her coat, happily jumping in without a second thought. Kaizen joined her, the force of the water not pushing him even an inch. It was deep enough that a normal person could barely walk along the bottom. Ethan happily watched them goof about, while he enjoyed a second of time without getting hit, or tripped.

He leaned back, enjoying the sun, the quiet, the subtle ambience of the forest, and the odd person they could hear from the road. It almost sounded like someone was yelling nearby. *zen! KAIZEN!*

"By the roots! STOP WASTING MY TIME AND PICK UP!!" Ethan flinched, the realisation that sound was in fact coming from nearby, he began riffling through his pocket. **"KAIZEN!!"** the voice booming as Ethan pulled the crystal out. He looked to Kaizen, currently out of his reach as he was in the middle of the water. Hesitantly he brought it closer, warily opening his mouth.

"Uh.... Hello?"

".... Who is this?" The voice immediately calmed, strict, professional.

"E-Ethan." Ethan sat unsettled, the call had silenced, the colour dulled as though they'd hung up. He began lightly tapping his foot to calm his nerves.

"My sincere apologies, young master."

Young master. The colour drained from his face; his throat grew dry. He almost dropped the crystal. He could feel his breath pick up, but he stifled it. **"I'm not..."** Ethan whispered.

"Ah. E- "another brief moment of silence; **"Ahem, I wanted to speak to Kaizen, is he with you?"** Ethan bit his bottom lip. He needed to calm down, the reminder that he did in fact know Kaizen eased some tension, but as Kaizen hadn't been entirely truthful their entire journey, he found himself uneasy. He began twirling the object lightly in his fingers, a form of relief. **"Hello?"**

He flinched, realising he hadn't responded. **"He's playing in the water. I can try to get him"**

A loud exhausted sigh came from the object. **"Of course he is."** A few unintelligible sounds followed, muffled in the background as though someone was trying desperately not to cause a scene despite their frustration. **"Leave him be, I don't want to inconvenience you."** They returned, that professional air so strong one wouldn't think he'd been yelling moments prior.

"It's fine. Uh. Your name is?" Ethan stood himself up, briskly heading along the bank in Kaizen's direction. Twigs broken underfoot, the odd sound of stones shifting from their home as he walked by. The running water only got louder as he neared its edge.

"Oh, apologies. I should have introduced myself first. My name is Brom Belesprit"

Ethan stopped as he reached a closer point to the two, Kimiko was on Kaizen's shoulders, both of them flailing like children, loud enough that even Brom could hear. **"One second."** The boy used a polite tone before raising one hand close to his mouth. **"Kaizen!"** He waved the crystal above him. **"A guy called Brom wants to talk to you!"**

The duo looked his way, Kaizen's face dropped, horrified, while Kimiko erupted into a fit of laughter, louder than Ethan had heard this whole trip. She lost her balance, swiftly pulling Kaizen down with her into the water. The minutes after were heavy, Kaizen apologised frequently, got distracted thrice, apologised again. Once it was over, he looked more exhausted than the night prior. He slipped the crystal into his pocket, sheepishly glancing at his companions. **"We should probably hurry up."** He nervously chuckled.

"Brombles has the grumples." Kimiko snickered, while ringing her hair out.

"Yeaah... Though I guess this one was my fault. We can make up some lost time if we walk a bit faster, we're only a few days out."

After picking up their bags, the group returned to the road. Ethan wandered quietly behind, his mind elsewhere as he pondered the previous call. He could hear Kimiko and Kaizen start conversation; he clenched a fist. If he wanted answers for things, he needed to be more forward. **"Kaizen?"** he picked up the pace, walking beside his friends. **"Is Brom going to be at your place?"** he asked quietly. Kaizen's hand brushed the back of his head.

"Yeah. He works with us. He doesn't live at our place, but he's there pretty often. He said he'd like to talk to you."

Ethan's hand slid up his arm, the tips of his fingers blue. He raised his shoulders, tensed. Kimiko curled her arm around him, a big grin on her face. **"He's a kill joy, so you'll get on great."** She teased.

Ethan glared at her, but Kaizen patted his head. **"He's nice. He's going to help us out by giving you a few more options."** The two released him, swiftly picking up the pace. **"We'll get there before he gets even more angry."** Kaizen shuddered.

"Agreed" Kimiko oddly complied, a visible sweat drop on her cheek.

The trio walked fast, ignoring opportunities to stop, Kimiko halted all teasing for the meantime, though her boredom wasn't satisfied. She took up scouting duties, checking for problems instead of causing them. With clear skies and a main road to walk on, they came across little to no struggles. Day turned night; Their camp quiet, even the strangers who'd followed them so many evenings prior had seemingly vanished. The following few days continued, a constant walk, Kaizen took the brunt of watch duty, his exhaustion never truly satiated as they pressed on until late evenings. Villages turned to towns as they

neared a big city. Ethan's apprehension heightened. More people walked the same road, elves often in view.

Despite the anxieties, Ethan found himself fascinated by the architecture of the buildings nearby, and the mountain that loomed over all. Its peak hidden by clouds. He only caught a glimpse as trees took up the majority of their view. They trailed away from the main path, deeper into the forest. He felt relieved, the lack of people a comfort. The sun hung high, they'd reach their destination in a few hours, well before sundown. The lush brush sprawled across the thicker trees at the edge, grass reached half way up their calves, a slog to walk through. Kaizen swayed heavily, his features changing between humanoid and not. As they passed through a ring of thin trees, a loud thud stopped the smaller duo. Kaizen was out like a light, his form rapidly changing, pushing the trees over without effort. Leaves, branches, stones, roots, all crushed beneath him as he snored loudly. **"Huh. Well, we can leave him here"** Kimiko said quietly. A swift shrug, walking onward.

"What? We can't do that" Ethan growled, he dropped their belongings, attempting to pull one out from under Kaizen's arm, to no avail. No doubt whatever was in there was now completely crushed.

"Home is literally just that way. He'll be fine sleeping here by himself" Kimiko was unwilling to budge, but neither was Ethan.

"I'm not going unless he's coming." He pouted.

Kimiko's head dropped back; an annoyed groan reached the sky. **"Fine, you stay here with him, and I'll come back in a bit."** She waved a hand, before Ethan was able to protest, she'd disappeared.

"...Okay then. I guess I'll just set things up myself. Again." He grumbled quietly.

Lavender overpowered the senses, radiating through a wooden panelled hall. Loud chatters filled the dull space, the only source of light coming from a single room. It was jam-packed with lively folk, all noisily conversing among themselves, their bodies littered in scars, yet adorned in wonderfully expensive fabrics. The colour pink scattered throughout the room, on their fingernails, streaks of hair, accessories. Not a single person went without it. They packed bags, grabbed various weaponry, picked up rope, all preparing for some big event with a jolly demeanour shared between. They cheered themselves on in an almost wholesome way, all proudly showcasing the crest on their clothes. A serpent devouring a crystal.

THUD

The walls shook, glasses knocked from the table, the banner that hung so proudly on the wall fell at one edge. The room went silent, wide eyes hesitantly glanced in the direction of the hall. Their morale immediately dipped to fear. They all cautiously held their breath, as the silence continued a few began to whisper among themselves.

The air was dense, it heightened as one stepped down the hall, the door at the very end strewn in darkness. Not a window in sight. The inside of the room was cold, small. A lone bag sat in the corner; a fairly luxurious bed rested against the wall. A wooden carved dresser across from it, beautifully decorated, a polished mirror cracked through the centre. A fist pulled from the wall, the hole it left revealing thick stone. A heavy breath echoed, weathered fingers slid across clear cheekbones, curling around a short

brown fringe, the knuckles bloodied. Their frame hulking, tall and wide, muscles threatening to pull free from the binds of cloth.

A glimpse of a boy ran through his mind, petrified. His body tensed, hair pulled, teeth clenched. *Why was he there? Why didn't he stay where he was supposed to?* A whisper followed his thoughts, it coiled around him, constantly repeating everything he wished to push down in his ear. He swung an arm. **"Shut up"** he growled, his voice low, deep, filled with rage.

The force of the swing caused his upper body to face the mirror, he caught his reflection, eyes tired, the brown of his hair tugged in one hand. The whispers continued, the vision of himself plagued by a black figure, it hung from him, a gaping mouth that never ceased moving. Everything overlapped incoherently, it drove him mad, the sound growing. It consumed all, his thoughts, his senses, his emotions, it had a visible hold on him that he had no control over. His body reacted the only way it knew, a fist hit the mirror. Shards flew to the sides, skin torn by glass, the smell of iron sneaking its way through everything else. Droplets hit the floor, the sting gone, pain dulled so swiftly one could barely call it a distraction. He stared at the damage, that incessant whisper clawing its way through every part of him.

The door clicked open, the light of the hall peeking through. **"Gabranth?"** a masculine voice called out, hiding behind the safety of the thick wooden door. The man stood tall, arms fell to his sides, head down. *Stay focused.*

"We're ready"

Chapter 8

The sky shimmered in yellows, orange and pink. Thick clouds contrasting the dark of night as it approached, creating a glorious view. Ethan set the last of the firewood down, stacked neatly beside an already lit flame. The crackle was calming, a warmth radiated from it, blanketing anything nearby. Ethan's arms curled around his legs, knees pulled toward his chest. He enjoyed the ambience, crickets were beginning their evening song, the rustle of leaves was gentle.

He closed his eyes, taking in the smell of burning wood. He'd never tire of it, despite missing the comfort of a soft bed, or the safety of four walls, there was something freeing about being outdoors. The danger kept him on his toes, made him wary, but he was more aware of the things he'd never noticed before. The sound of Kaizen's snoring in the background, he'd almost blocked it out, a strange white noise he'd all but gotten used to after so many hours.

He cracked an eye open, Kaizen so easily in view. He trailed the mass of gold and white, stopping at his chest, gold plated, thick, he wondered if he hadn't been able to achieve what he tried last time purely because he didn't know where to send it, but it was harder considering one couldn't feel even basic heat from scales like his. He spotted a small crack in the plating on his chest, revealing pink flesh underneath. He stood, arms falling to his sides as he briskly walked over. He loosely ran his hand over the crack, sliding across it until he felt something soft. Kaizen didn't budge, still sleeping soundly.

His fingers glowed blue, eyes closed, he tried to block out everything else, focusing on Kaizen's breath, he could feel his body rumble as he took air in, the exhale did the same. He pushed his aura into his

fingertips, that pressure built, yet he still had nowhere to send it. It all felt futile, someone else had taken the reins last time, maybe it just wasn't possible. The only thing he could think of, was releasing his aura in a type of wave along Kaizen's skin. He could imagine that leaving his fingers, running across a form he could see.

He could feel himself tire a little, a pulsating blue spanned the dragon's skin, it disappeared under the scales, anything that lay exposed drenched in blue. It seeped in, Kaizen's breathing relaxed. Ethan pulled his hand away, the light gone. He shook his head, he had no idea what he was doing, but it couldn't hurt to try. With the accomplishment of an attempt under his belt, he decided he too was ready for bed. The area was safe; Kimiko hadn't returned but she'd likely be back soon. He'd eaten already, and the past few days had been non-stop walking. He was well and truly happy to do nothing for a time.

He lay a short distance from his friend, within earshot, but where that level of sound wouldn't drive him mad. He pulled his cloak around him, threw one of their bags under his head, and he was set.

The night was still young, the crackle roaring ever louder as another piece of wood hit the fire. Ethan stirred, a figure sat beside the flame, blue hair. He moved, a weight falling from his upper body as he sat upright. A thick blanket had been thrown on top of him. **"Hey"** he rubbed his eyes, it felt like he'd barely slept, an hour or two at most had passed before she'd turned up.

"Hey" She returned a smile, a bottle of wine in hand, along with a few strange looking snacks in a bag. Ethan scooted her way, pulling the blanket with him. He sat beside her, the pungent smell of wine overtaking the camp. She seemed content, chewing on something he hadn't seen before. She rifled through a small pouch, taking out a thin stick, holding it his way.

He took it, a sickly-sweet taste danced across his tongue as he popped part of it in his mouth. It felt like it melted, yet it was incredibly chewy. His excitement made Kimiko giggle; she watched him earnestly. While she typically caused him nothing but problems, she always took a moment to watch him try something new, be it good or bad, she never took those moments away from him. The chewy sweet he'd been given got stuck in his teeth, it made his jaw ache trying to break it down enough to swallow, yet he wasn't complaining. **"What is this stuff?"** he asked, mouth still partially full.

"Toffee" she took a swig of her drink, returning her gaze to the fire.

"Is this what you went to go get?"

"Kinda. Since this is our last hurrah for a while, I thought it'd be nice to eat some snacks." She lowered her head, resting her cheek against her knees. Ethan eyed the pouch, curiosity was urging him to see what else was in there, but he was hesitant to touch it. **"I brought them for everyone"** Kimiko took out a cube covered in powdered sugar, popping it into her mouth, she then pushed the pouch his way.

Ethan's eyes lit up **"Really?"** he asked, her nod his confirmation. Excitedly he scanned through the bag, picking up one of each, they were inspected one by one, turned in his fingers, sniffed, squished before being popped into his mouth. Each new item caused a reaction of pure bliss, Kimiko found herself laughing more than once.

"Try this one next" she handed him something red, small, hard.

Ethan took it with the same childlike wonder he had with the others. The moment it hit his tongue, his face reddened, hands flailing in front of his open mouth. Kimiko felt her sides splitting, she convulsed in such a

loud laugh that she'd fallen over, feet in the air. Ethan struggled, sweating profusely while trying to quell the invisible flame in his mouth. He downed an entire canteen of water, his tongue stinging. He was cautious after that, tasting something before throwing the whole thing in his mouth. They spent a few hours chatting idly, eating snacks, and watching the stars. The sugar crash came hard and fast on Ethan's side, falling asleep where he sat, loud snoring, his limbs outstretched, a goofy smile on his face.

Kimiko placed her bottle down, she took in the night air, watching the two strange companions she'd been tasked to watch for the night. Kaizen seemed content, better than he had been, and Ethan was finally less anxious. She lightly tussled his hair, pulling the blanket over him properly.

As she put another log on the fire, a rustle caught her attention. A glimpse of a man caused an eye roll. **"Seriously?"** she groaned. She stood herself up, annoyed, hand on her hip. *Taking out one is easy enough.* She walked their way, watching as they briskly ran away in fear. She smirked, maybe it was time for a little game, she'd been so patient the past few days. It'd be okay to let off some steam. Her hand slid across her boot, lightly tugging a dagger from its sheath. She spun it, swiftly chasing her prey.

A strong hand shook Ethan's shoulder, he stirred, tired, annoyed, this was the second time in the night his sleep was broken. He cracked an eye open, hearing a deep voice with a strange accent. **"Kid, I need ya help."** He was shaken again, a groan escaped him. He forced himself into a sitting position, hair a tangled mess. Eyes groggily snapping open, though struggling to stay that way, drifting between open and closed consistently. **"Please, the lady is in trouble"** that voice again, Ethan grew more alert. As his eyes settled, he noticed a buff man, wearing a brown leather jacket, blonde hair swerved to one side. His shoulder was released, Ethan flinched, his hand instinctively sitting in front of him in case he needed it. The man looked panicked; his breath heavy as though he'd been running awhile.

"What's going on?" Ethan asked, swiftly pulling the blanket away from him.

"It's the lady. They found her, I can't get her back by myself." he shook his head, eyes pleading.

Ethan felt unsure, a pit in his stomach told him no, but he couldn't ignore it if it was true, worst case he could run away, and he had the ability to protect himself; he'd finally been winning fights lately. **"Okay"** he stood himself up, obviously this man had to be telling some kind of truth, otherwise he could've just attacked him while he was sleeping. Byron perked up; he made his way toward the edge of camp. Ethan followed after picking up his staff, he noticed Kimiko wasn't there, likely not a problem, she'd be back soon enough regardless. Hopefully if things got hard, he could run back this way.

The two ran through the woods, Ethan just behind Byron, still cautious. **"What were you guys doing this way?"** Ethan asked.

Byron took a moment, at first Ethan thought he hadn't heard him. **"Boy did I luck out when I saw you."** He said, not once looking back.

Ethan raised an eyebrow; he hadn't answered his question. **"How'd they find you guys?"** he asked.

"It's just up ahead!" he called back, again Ethan's question wasn't answered.

He began to slow, something was off. Coincidences were definitely a thing, but this all felt strangely out of place. They just happened to be taken now, while so close to their camp? While Kimiko was out? Byron disappeared into the brush, the night consuming him. Ethan came to a halt; something was watching him.

More than one pair of eyes. “...**Byron?**” he asked, the trees were thick, masking anything hiding in the dark.

Kimiko patted her hands, happily grinning at her fallen prey. She sheathed her weapon, carelessly taking her time in walking back now that the task was done. Camp was a bit of a trek, but one she cleared quickly. As Kaizen came back into view, she noticed the fire was out. Odd but with no one awake it was likely to happen. It was cooler, a light breeze spanning through the camp, Kaizen’s snoring was the same, a near overwhelming sound when one had been away from it for a time. She wandered back to her spot, passing by the blanket Ethan had been using. She paused; eyes wandered down as she spotted it empty. “**Ethan?**”

The night was brimming with noise, excitement, danger. Ethan fled through the brush, heart racing, pole in hand, a blue light shone from it, used as defence while also keeping his path lit. A tickle of blood came from his arm; another cut on his wrist. He struggled to remember the way they’d come, but all he needed was to listen out for Kaizen’s snoring. As he darted between another two trees, a figure snapped into view, they swung at him, a long-curved blade in hand. Ethan brought his pole forward, metal clashed, he brought his knee upward, connecting with their stomach before making his way forward. Another two came from the sides, he dodged the first, the second came with another blade, his pole took the brunt. It scratched his shoulder, the fight down to a battle of strength Ethan was swiftly losing. He ducked down, they tumbled over him, Ethan swiftly took his chance to run, as another came into view.

“**There’s so damned many!**” he darted in another direction, hoping to lose the few that hung so close behind.

A woman’s figure caught the edge of his sight, her hand outstretched, gloved, pink, a sinister smile looming in the darkness. “**Don’t let him get away, boys.**” Her voice was sweet, overwhelmingly so, her figure so brazenly flaunting her curves, a strange haze lined the edge of Ethan’s vision as more men rushed from the nearby bushes. They were burly, covered in scars, the colour pink strewn about them all. Ethan tore his eyes away, picking up the pace. He needed to circle back, but that seemed impossible with so many people behind him.

He gritted his teeth, “**Kimiko, why the hell aren’t you here when I need you!?**” he growled. If she’d been there, he wouldn’t have had the option to do something this stupid. He knew she’d be snickering at him for days after this. A mass of steel came from his right, he stepped back as it hit the ground with a thud, cracks formed around it. A lump formed in his throat. That almost squashed him. He darted back, looping past another person as their arms swung down. He could feel the ground shake under his feet; *how did a human do that with just their hands?* Their speed, strength, none of this made sense. He’d gotten turned around again, even more lost.

A blade swiped across his chest, missing him by a hair. His shirt tore in place of skin. Eyes widened; he spun around his opponent. “**No running, if you get away, lady Teresa won’t praise me**” a chill ran down Ethan’s spine, the voice echoed around him, he could hear steps but couldn’t tell where they were coming from. His body screamed at him to move, he obliged, stepping back, his pole moved upward, metal collided once again. A slim male’s face was inches from his own, a smile so wide it made him uncomfortable. Long black hair floated as both parties pulled back. The glint of another blade caught Ethan’s eye.

SLICE

A few drops of blood hit the floor, a shallow cut stained his chest, painfully throbbing as the man opposite him visibly cheered. **"I got him! She'll be so pleased with me!"** his bloody knife waved around like a trophy. *What is wrong with these guys?* Ethan barely caught his breath before two fists collided with a spot he'd just moved from. The ground rattled beneath him again, throwing him off balance. He jumped backwards, sliding further across the dirt to steady himself. Pole at the ready. *This is insane, humans aren't supposed to be this strong.*

As another swung at him, he blocked, taking one more step back. The gaps in the trees were filled with strangers, all enthusiastic while holding their weapons outward. He felt his heart in his throat, his body shaking. Everywhere he could see, was a person cutting off his escape. How did so many people manage to sneak up on him without him realising? The night had grown quiet, so many eyes all staring his way, but none spoke. Ethan could hear footsteps, feminine, they moved so casually, he struggled to maintain some level of breath as he felt the fatigue settle in.

"Well done" her voice was familiar, commanding, seductive. **"You managed to stop him all by yourselves."** She boasted, the ring of men inching to the sides as she walked into view. Her pink hair tied at the end with a ribbon, another around her neck. She wore gloves, both in different styles, a skimpy chest piece barely covered her torso, while see through fabric hung at the bottom. She wore thick boots, heavy, laced to the knee. Her posture radiated confidence, and as she stopped, one man ran her way.

"I got him milady!" their voice shrill, excited.

They waited with baited breath as Teresa gave them a flicker of attention. **"Aww."** Her fingers caressed his chin; she gripped it with one hand. **"Well done, Riyu, now."** She forcefully released him, pushing him back. **"Bring him to my feet."**

Ethan stared at her in disbelief, the last time he'd seen her, she was a wreck, in tears, yet now she stood so commanding, surrounded by a bunch of thugs that all vied for her attention. He'd been well and truly duped. He could feel his breath pick up, panic, how could he get out of this? Where should he go, how far away were his friends? Would Kaizen even hear him if he was to call out? A flash of steel broke his train of thought, he raised his pole, blocked, barely. A foot collided with his stomach, he slid backward, a light gasp took him, another glint from behind, turning to block wasn't an option, his back lit up blue, the blade bounced off it, but his fatigue heightened. He needed an out, he dodged a punch, returning one of his own. There he spotted some kind of breather, he ran between the two in front of him, jumping as he reached one lanky unarmed man beside a tree. His foot collided with his face, a stepping stone to jump onto one of the branches.

He had a moment to breathe, his body ached, the sting on his chest was distracting as was his other shallow wounds. He glanced through the tree tops, which way were his friends. Which way did he need to go? It took him a moment, but he spotted it, those beautiful gold spines glinting in the moonlight. That way. The ground below him was plagued by people, he felt that frustration build. **"Damn it."** He huffed. **"I need an opening."** He scanned the forest floor; there had to be somewhere they didn't take up space.

"Not today kid" a voice snapped him back, he didn't need to look down, he could feel it, the tree was moving, tipping, a few men at its base had snapped this thing apart. It made no sense. He didn't have time to brace for impact, his back hit the ground, hard. The wind was knocked from his lungs; he

struggled to regain some semblance of breath as these figures surrounded him on all sides. It hurt, not just the wounds, the fatigue, but his own stupidity, this was his fault.

They all moved forward, his whole body was sweating, scared, but he didn't want to show it. Before anyone could touch him, one could hear a finger snap.

Silence. The men backed off, unwilling to defy this one person who had taken centre stage once again. He clicked his tongue. Cautiously he stood up, he'd finally understood. That strength, that unnatural urge to please her. **"So that's how it is."** He started, eyes narrow. That pink fog plaguing the corner of his vision. **"They're under a spell of yours."**

She clapped her hands lightly, a spring in her step. **"Oh? You noticed!"** She waved her finger at him, blowing a kiss. **"You deserve a reward."**

Ethan felt a burning rage within him, yet the way she moved, the way she spoke, it was tantalizing. He felt like he was wrapped around her finger, all he could see was her. **"Don't think you can play with me you bi-"** his eyes widened; *What? She's gone.* All he could see was pink, that fog, her breath felt like it was in his ear, he spun around. He still couldn't see anything, his vision unfocused.

The anxiety building, panic screwing with his thoughts, he tightened the grip on his weapon, his palms blue. He turned again, nothing, again, again and again, he could only see her lackeys hidden among pink smoke, a whisper in his ear. Suddenly a pressure tenderly slid across his chest, he froze, her body pressed against his back. His eyes widened, heat struck his side, a sharp immediate pain, his breath caught, muscles tensed, he could feel something trickle down the side of his shirt, wet, sticky. Something was lodged in his skin, it twisted, he struggled to keep himself from falling. Her hand still clinging to his chest as if to hold him in place. **"My dear boy. You've always just been my little toy."** She whispered. Her fingers caressed him, slowly making their way up to his face. She lightly patted his cheek. **"It's a shame you broke so soon."** He could hear the smile, that mocking tone as whatever had struck him was pulled out. His legs gave way, it stung, it hurt to breathe, his body didn't know how to react, the wound began to weep with a blue smoke, it flickered across the cut, blood dripping.

"You're the first to put up a fight in a while. What a shame it didn't last very long." She circled him, watching his arms tense.

He desperately tried to get back up, struggling all the while. As he made a bit more progress, her foot collided with his wound, he winced, falling back into place. **"Damn...it."** He muttered quietly.

"Alright you slackers, we're heading home." She removed her foot, both hands raised as her hips swayed from side to side. **"When we get back, it'll be beers all round!"** The horde erupted into cheers, a booming sense of accomplishment, adding to the wound that was Ethan's pride. She turned to look at him, watching the pool of blood appear beneath him. **"Just don't die on me darling."** She sneered.

"I'll...do it. Just to spite you" he snickered. His reward was a kick to the stomach, he gasped again, body curled in an attempt to shield itself.

She groaned, **"Children are so annoying to deal with"** She glared at the men beside her. **"Bring him with us."** She took a step forward, happily walking away from the struggles she'd caused. **"Don't let him die on the way home."**

Ethan could feel something touch him, it made everything worse, he gritted his teeth, the ground was pulled from him. A pressure gripped his side so hard he felt sick. He stifled a yell, biting his bottom lip till it bled. "...**Sorry,**" Byron whispered.

As the group began walking away, a bush rustled in the distance. A hand covered her mouth, eyes wide. "...**oh shit.**" Her dark clothes made her almost invisible in the dark. She watched them casually walk away with her friend, a group too large to take on her own, she'd arrived too late. All she could do was follow them.

The halls were dimly lit; a wooden beam etched into stone and concrete. The mouth of a cave turned into someone's living quarters. Hints of lavender defiled the air, calming for most, but suffocating to the boy as he was carried inside. His head hung loosely toward the floor, a variety of stone to carpet. They stopped in a room, a bright lit space, unlike the others. The pressure on his side relented, gravity took hold of him as he dropped harshly to the floor. He curled up, his hands drifting to his sides, an attempt to contain the pain. "**Get someone to patch him up.**" Teresa's voice again. "**I'll see about our reward.**"

"Of course, "

As Ethan felt parts of his body numb, he closed his eyes, the only thing he could focus on was the sounds, footsteps, two sets disappearing from the room, cheering came a distance from where he was, they seemed to be all enjoying themselves while he lay dying on the floor on his own.

The room at the end of the hall was alight, the shards of glass now lay in a pile on the dresser, the muscular figure seated on his bed, hands gripping his knees, head down, knuckles bandaged. That incessant whisper still gnawing at him. As he tightened his grip, a shadow peered out beneath the gap in the door. "**Oi. Gabranth. Deal with the catch, will ya?**"

The man scowled at the door, he took in a breath, slowly standing himself up as he pushed it open. He brushed past Byron, the man swiftly stepped out of the way as he walked by, not once looking his way. Byron waited, watching as this mountainous man made his way toward his current 'job'. He quietly wandered through the narrow passageway, up the steps, his eyes to the floor as he stepped inside the bright room, the immediate scent of iron plaguing his nose. "**Ugh... that smell-**" He lifted his head, the room mostly empty, there was a seat in the corner, a table toward the wall, one shelf containing various medical items, and there in the middle of the floor, was a black cloaked figure. Blood pooling beside them.

He inched closer, something about that cloak was familiar, but then again black cloth was extremely common. As he stood beside them, something caught his eye, a red brooch, surrounded by copper etched with a zigzag pattern. His heart stopped, his vision trailed across the boy's frame, his brown hair, height, the clincher was the ears, pointed. "**Ethan?**" He knelt forward, catching the boy's heavy breaths. His hands reached for him, but he pulled back, fists clenched. No, he wasn't supposed to be here. He couldn't be here! This was a mistake, it had to be a mistake. It wasn't. "**What are you doing here!?**" his hands ran across his face, through his hair. He paced on the floor, everything a blur as he tried to make some rationality of it all. His foot hit something wet, everything came to a halt, that smell, his eyes glimpsed red. "**You're bleeding!**"

It was like a switch went off, the panic became a list of things to do, he swiftly ran over to the shelf, grabbing hold of multiple objects before dropping himself and everything else beside the boy. **“Can you hear me?”** He asked, prepping a cloth and some alcohol. Ethan stirred, that voice was familiar. He could barely hear anything over his own heartbeat. He was cold, tired, in pain. He attempted to speak, but all that came out was a wince.

The man lifted Ethan's shirt, a look of guilt as he poured some of the liquid over the wound. Ethan convulsed, held down by one firm hand to stop him from moving. **“I know, try to bear with it for a minute.”** He didn't wait, firmly pulling the wound closed, using a tape to hold it in place while he bound everything with a bandage.

Ethan's eyes flickered open, that bright blue staring him down. **“Why.... are you?”** His words were weak, constantly struggling between breaths.

“We'll talk later.”

He pushed the supplies to the side, an arm scooped underneath Ethan, slowly pulling him upright. He winced loudly, and the further up he went, the more pained groans escaped. His legs refused to hold his weight; the pain so hefty that he barely remembered to breathe properly. **“I...can't.”** his words came out shaky.

His arm was pulled over Gabranth's shoulders, **“Lean your weight on me.”** He carefully pulled Ethan closer to him; he steadied him as he managed some semblance of balance. **“You can sleep as soon as we get out, but I just need you to focus right now. Okay?”**

Ethan nodded faintly. **“Y-yeah...okay...I can...do that.”**

The first step was a difficult one, but they eventually made progress. **“There you go. Just be as quiet as you can.”**

Ethan's feet dragged across the floor, his strength disappearing with each push forward. **“That's...easier said... than done.”** He huffed. He slipped a little, swiftly repositioned against his father's side. He lifted his head, staring up at this large man, he looked so put together, but the way he was holding him was strangely gentle. Why was he going out of his way to get him out of here?

They paused part way down the hall, it split, heading off in two different directions, one containing a fairly large amount of noise, lights dancing through the darkness as one could hear clinking and cheers. Gabranth pulled them both to the wall, resting his back against it, body in front. Footsteps echoed nearby, two men chatting among themselves as they rounded the corner. **“That kid was a pain in the ass tonight.”** A rugged slim figure rubbed a bruised arm. **“Yeah, but it was worth it, imagine, a whole month off”** They nudged their friend, arm around their shoulders as they fanned their hands. **“Haha! Too right. That client has gotta be loaded to do all this ”** their voices trailed off, covered by their jolly companions.

Gabranth took a step forward, eager to move. Ethan began slipping, his strength gone as he slid down. **“Woah. Come on buddy, I need you to stay awake”**

“I'm.... still awake.” His voice was almost a whisper. **“I can't...move... my legs...anymore.”**

A saddened but gentle expression crossed the man, he leaned down, pulling Ethan's arm forward, positioning his body closer to his back. He leaned forward, one hand holding the boy's leg. **"What...are you doing?"** Ethan asked.

"Sorry...bear with me." He was pulled onto Gabranth's back, carried in a piggyback. A pained groan escaped him as he lifted upward, the discomfort soon passed. Both arms draped around the man's neck, the heat was a strange comfort, this broad back, it was nostalgic, yet he felt so frustrated deep down. Why was he doing this now? Everything felt so heavy, his limbs cold, he struggled to keep his eyes open, to breathe, to move, the idea of sleep so enticing.

They walked through, unbothered by the partying brutes, quietly, steadily, they made their way toward the entrance. Gabranth glanced over his shoulder, the boy barely hanging on. **"We're almost there."** He whispered. Ethan groaned lightly, an acknowledgement without needing to expend much effort.

"Almost where, exactly?" That silky cold tone shocked them both. Gabranth stopped, his grip on the boy tightened. Teresa stood against the wall, that sickeningly sweet smile, she flaunted her curves as she pushed away, hips swaying as she stepped closer. **"My, my, my. What do we have there? You should know better than to remove my toys from their box you silly goose."** She kept a distance, a playful expression as a finger came to her lips. The man shrunk slightly, a visible sweat as she inched closer. Yet the moment she came near Ethan, his expression dropped, menacing, dark, she recoiled.

"...I'm going to pretend you weren't disobeying me, so long as you be a good boy, and put him back where you found him." She cautiously inched her hand toward the boy, it was swatted away, she flinched. She stood shocked.

"You aren't taking this one. I'm getting him medical attention." He moved to pass her; she swiftly blocked his path. Standing before him, mouth agape.

"You can't defy me!" She hissed.

"...Move"

"Do you have any idea what's at stake? Now put. Him. Back."

Gabranth ignored her, forcing his way through without a second thought. This didn't sit well with the woman. Her fists clenched, teeth grinding together, ears red. She watched him walk toward the front gate, uncontested, with their catch so openly stolen in front of her.

With the exit in full view, a chill ran down his spine, something was wrong. He spun around, one hand released Ethan's leg and raised in front of him, just in time for a long thin needle to penetrate his skin. He didn't move, wince, nothing, A blank expression that ran a chill down Teresa's spine. She held out another needle, the edge oddly coloured. **"You can't dodge all of these, and if you turn around, he becomes my target."**

"Go ahead."

She clicked her tongue, throwing another one in his direction. His hand curled around it, swiftly dropping it to the floor, momentum gone. She threw two in quick succession, an attempt to catch him off guard. Those too, hit the floor with little fanfare. **"Are you done?"** he asked coldly.

She held out another, giving a snide smile, launching it not at him, but at Ethan's exposed leg. The reaction was as expected; he blocked it with his arm. It embedded into the skin not massively far from the first one.

"Ooh. Boy, have I found a fun little game." She chirped. **"Tell you what. To save us the hassle, if you take the hit for all what I have left, then I'll let you both go."** She waved her hand; five needles nestled between her fingers.

The man didn't hesitate, he carefully put Ethan down, standing in front of him. He held out his arm, leaving a clear target as he pulled out the two she'd thrown earlier. **"Hurry up."**

He watched her hesitate, eyes darting between her target and him, Ethan was so far out of view at this point, she couldn't hit him unless Gabranth moved. She raised her hand, two released in his direction. He held up the same wounded forearm, purposefully taking both hits. The fear in her eyes was masked by frustration, she threw another one, he 'caught' it in the same spot as the others. As her hand emptied, he pulled all of them from his skin, dropping them to the floor. He turned his back to her, picking up his son without a word. A white flicker crossed his tattoo, a subtle whisper plaguing his ears as he began walking again.

A loud whistle echoed behind him; The hall erupted into a bundle of noise. **"I said I would let you go. Didn't say they would."** She blew a kiss his way, leaning against the wall, arms folded. Gabranth picked up the pace, jostling the poor boy as they headed outside. With more open space, it didn't take long before they were surrounded, multiple burly figures standing in his way. Byron stood at the back, beside his mistress. He looked concerned, though masked it as Teresa glanced his way. **"You might as well give up."** Teresa waved from her spot, happily grinning at him. **"Can someone get my toy back for me?"**

A man headed Gabranth's way, a metal bat poised to strike, Gabranth barely moved, his leg instinctively hitting them in the chest. His tattoo flickered again, his shadow seemingly shivering. The horde piled in, the thing they knew best, clawing at the boy in his arms. Three attempted to subdue this bulky mass of muscle, only to be thrown to the floor, Ethan firmly tucked under one arm. He was nervous, Ethan hung limply, his breathing shallow, he feared if he waited any longer this boy wouldn't last.

A person flew his way, a blade curved to strike him. He grabbed it barehanded, throwing the man back into the group behind. He could feel his own breath struggle, his arm numbing, the blood loss was minor, but a subtle throb gave him a small sense of concern. The effects of the poison running through his system was becoming evident, no matter, this promise was one he was going to keep, regardless of how it turned out. His fist collided with another body, another, another, his breath wearing, strength waning, his knee threatening to buckle. As two more jumped him at the same time, he grabbed the shirt of one, throwing them into the other. He didn't notice until it was too late, a third had pulled his son from him. The boy lay in the arms of another.

I know, no matter what. You'll keep him safe.

That wouldn't stand, *it couldn't*. His jaw clenched, arms tensed, stance widened, the whispers he'd pushed so far back crept in like the darkness of night. His shadow extended, the ground pitch black, a large circle with him in its centre. **"Do not. Touch my son."** His voice had an echo, dark, his eyes tinted in a pink hue, different from Teresa, his tattoo a bright white, with strange pinkish purple lines trailing across his arm and face. The person holding Ethan began sinking, falling into a field of black without

resistance. Everything went silent as this man disappeared without a trace, the only remains was Ethan laying uncomfortably on the floor.

The people surrounding them inched back, whispers started among them, Teresa watched from a safe distance. **“Don’t just stand there!”** She growled as Gabranth picked up her toy again, his arm over his shoulder, his other propping him upright. He walked forward. The black moved with him, someone else attempted to step into it, falling into the abyss that lay beneath.

After that, people parted ways, letting him pass uncontested. They stared at him in eerie silence as he disappeared into the trees, Teresa wailing angrily at them from behind. The shadow faded, slimming down as it became just them two. The whispers were incessant, spiralling around him in an uncontrollable manner. Battling with his newfound headache, the numbness in his body, the anxiety, it was feeding on his thoughts, keeping him so wrapped up in its clutches he barely remembered moving, yet he was in the forest. They kept a hold of him so profoundly that nothing else could get in, smell, sound, nothing. Just him and this ominous presence that lingered beside him.

“...nng”

A quiet groan snapped him out of it, everything faded away as he spotted a light blue glow coming from his shoulder, Ethan’s palm alight. **“Kiddo?”** he asked, awaiting a response he knew was unlikely. He could hear noise behind him. They’d followed him, waiting for him to collapse one way or another. If he wasn’t cautious, they’d get their way, the poison circulating through his body was beginning to cause other problems. His vision was failing, he knew at bare minimum the outskirts of the city wasn’t far off, if he kept it up for a few more hours he could come across a house or town and hopefully find someone to help. Though his anxiety started to build as the realization hit, what if he didn’t make it that long? What if it was already too late, if all this was for nothing. If he collapsed before they got anywhere.

“Ethan!” a familiar voice rang through the trees, a woman’s, he’d heard it before. The load on his side lightened, Ethan’s other arm lifted across another pair of shoulders. Shorter, slender, worried. The blue hair, and ears threw a memory back at him; she was with him at their last encounter, clearly protecting him from what she deemed a threat. She didn’t even look Gabranth’s way, just lightly pulling both of them in a specific direction.

“This way!” another’s voice called, a tall man standing among the trees, only wearing a pair of torn trousers, part of him covered in bandages. A hint of gold reflected in the moonlight. **“We have a doctor on the way”** Kaizen let them pass, inhaling large amounts of air. The trio in front could feel the heat as they hobbled away, a roar of gold fire lining the path they came, barely missing the trees, but lingering on grass, it strangely didn’t expand, contained in that single line.

Morning was long, dreadful, the air heavy with anxiety. Thick brick walls contained a cozy well-lit hallway, sunlight seeping in through large open windows. Pictures lined the walls between each door frame. Only one sat open, revealing a small room, wooden floors, a small bedside table, closed chest, one large glass window with decorations at its edge. Beneath it was a single bed, brown hair sprawled across a white plump pillow, chest and ribs covered in tightly wound bandages. A heavy breath the only noise permeating the room. A chair sat to its side, a bulk of muscles hunched over, their fingers ever so gently cupping the boy’s hand.

The open door had more than one body peering inside, with Kimiko too cautious to enter. Her tail swished about in an almost anxious manner; her eyes narrowed to the man sitting in that chair. Kaizen had more sense; he walked inside. Stopping shy of the bedside, his hand rubbing the back of his neck. For a change he was wearing appropriate clothing, a baggy shirt that was sloppily stuffed into his trousers. Held up only by a belt tied in a knot. **"He's okay."** His voice broke the silence. Gabranth merely lowered his head, his hands gripping Ethan's a little tighter. His face was pale, large bags under his eyes. Yet unwavering. Kaizen glanced his arm, the bandage red, soon needing to be redressed. This man was still coming off the effects of poison, a fairly potent one, he'd not left this kid's side even once.

"There's a spare room next door."

"I'm fine." His voice was quiet, defeated, sad. He slumped a little more.

"He isn't going anywhere. You'll be next door, and I'll tell you when he wakes up."

The man looked hesitant, but a subtle sway on his chair convinced Kaizen to continue. **"That antidote isn't going to be anywhere near as effective if you don't look after yourself. Your body has to have a chance to fight back first. I'll make sure both you AND him are able to stick around here for as long as you need. Okay?"** He watched him intently, waiting for some kind of give. It was reluctant, but he stood, his hands slowly releasing his son's. Kaizen lightly put a hand on his back, his steps haphazard as the exhaustion continued gnawing at him. Gabranth took one last look, the sadness in his eyes unmistakable as he was led away.

Kimiko wandered in as they left, assuming the spot at Ethan's side. She leaned forward, watching his strained breath with a hint of sadness. It took about ten minutes before Kaizen returned, he awkwardly stood at her side, hands in his pockets. **"I'm surprised you let him stay"** Kimiko said quietly.

".... I couldn't just force him to leave. I know Ethan still wants him here. Even if he'll be pissed at me for letting him stick around."

"I don't think he'll be upset at you." She raised one leg over the other, resting an elbow on it as her hand cupped the side of her face. **"I know he wants it too."**

They lingered in the silence a while, both watching the boy with a similar sense of sadness. Kaizen leaned a little closer, his hand lightly tugging at the bandage at the boy's side, getting a quick assessment of the damage. **"...he's lucky the wounds weren't too deep."** He put things back where they were supposed to be, cautious not to accidentally make anything worse.

"That's probably cause of that weird ability of his," Kimiko mused. **"I've seen him block damage with it before; kind of like armour?"**

"Has he actually told you what his ability is?"

"Probably, I can't say I pay attention once he starts talking. But I know the basics after watching him use it."

"The blue stuff is his life. People like him use it almost like an external weapon." Kimiko frowned, a hint of guilt weighing her down. Kaizen lingered on the silence, his fingers fidgeting slightly, shifting his weight between both feet, awkwardly swaying as he anxiously contemplated finishing his explanation.

“...He’s a high elf”

Her hand dropped, head briefly falling with it as she caught herself. Slowly she turned his way, eyes wide. Finger pointing at the boy. **“Him?”** Kaizen nodded. This just sent her in a strange downward spiral, pointing, staring, mouth agape. **“Aren’t they all prissy old guys?”** she asked.

“You know that old guys were kids once, right?” he chuckled. **“To be honest, it wouldn’t surprise me if that’s why he got targeted. That ability is incredibly rare. He’d fetch a high price on the black market.”**

“...The whole Master thing”

“Yeah... technically we could be in a lot of trouble just for touching him”

“Pfft, like that would stop me from messing with him.” She waved her hand, that mischievous grin peering back. Kaizen gave her a playful nudge, a light shake of his head. He knew there was no arguing with her, but he didn’t want to change their dynamic either. The sheets rustled, catching their attention. Ethan’s head shifted lightly from side to side with a pained groan. It took a few minutes for his eyes to crack open, that bright blue oddly more vibrant than before. He tiredly glanced the room, confused, weak, tired, everything so unfocused he couldn’t settle in one place. **“Hey sleepyhead.”** Kimiko leaned a bit closer, pulling herself into his field of view. **“You, okay?”**

He gave a brief smile, still desperately trying to focus in some way. **“Where?”** he asked, his voice barely audible.

“You’re at my place. Just relax.” Kaizen gave a reassuring smile.

It didn’t do much to quell Ethan’s confusion. It was as though he was looking for something. He lingered on his friend’s figure a while. **“.... Kaizen?”** he asked. He lifted his head as if to look past him. Everything too blurry to distinguish, his head hit the pillow. Eyes drifting closed.

“It’s okay Ethan, just go back to sleep.” Before she could finish her sentence, his breathing steadied.

“Are you staying?” Kaizen asked. Kimiko nodded.

“Yeah, I’ll stick around for the day. It’d be nice to hang out until he wakes up properly.”

“Okay, I’m gonna...” he shuddered, a chill radiating down his spine as he struggled to say the next words. **“Talk to Brom.”**

The response was a laugh, short, loud, mocking. **“Have fun”** she teased, head in one hand again, a sickening grin on her face.

Kaizen glared at her; pouting. **“Behave, if he wakes up come tell me”** He turned around, walking in a slump toward the door.

“Yeah yeah.”

Kaizen wandered through the hall, the air lighter than it had been. He passed another door, slightly ajar. Gabranth lay in a bed on his side, completely wiped out. He continued to the end of the hall, a single

closed door the only protection he had against this horrifying creature. The scratching of a pen furiously writing on thick paper. He felt a lump in his throat, sweat lined his brow, he hesitantly reached for the wooden doorknob. With one swift breath he opened it, hands returning to his pockets, eyes down, refusing to look at the monster that presently sat at his desk.

"You've made things more difficult for me." The voice was stern, masking an annoyance. **"How is he?"** he asked, the scribble continued.

"He woke up for a second. He'll be fine, it might be a few days before he's a bit more coherent."

The pen halted, lightly put down next to a large stack of papers. The chair creaked, Kaizen's heart almost escaped his throat, dress shoes echoed across the hardwood floor, ending in front of him. He raised his head, glimpsing a thin tall figure though considerably shorter than himself, short silver hair, slicked back with a single piece lightly perked at the top. Delicate and overly decorated silver glasses framed his long face, accentuating his bright green eyes among pale skin. His ears were long, pointed outward. He wore a lavender collared shirt with a tiny flower embroidered at the edge, tucked in, covered by a knitted sweater vest in blue. His pants were black, creased, all leading to pointed black dress shoes. His eyebrows were clearly furrowed, a dent remained even when his expression softened.

"I'm pleased he's not in danger." He raised his head, the light from the window blocking any view of his eyes. **"But the fact he was captured when you AND Kimiko were supposed to be with him is unacceptable."** His scowl returned, hands held behind his back, his posture impeccable. Kaizen slouched more, glancing away again. **"I know."** A long, tired sigh filled the room, a thumb and index finger lightly rubbing the bridge of his nose, his glasses pushed up slightly. **"I will do my best to keep everything under wraps until after he recovers, then we can talk about next steps."** He returned to the desk, brightly lit by natural sun, a flush green plant climbing the wall to its side, a bookshelf cluttered with various knickknacks set behind him. The desk was littered with deep claw marks, chipped edges, covered in stacks of paper.

Kaizen was stunned; he took a moment. Cocking an eyebrow, confused, he inched closer to the desk, peering over. **"What is it?"** that stern voice again, like a parent telling off their child. Kaizen visibly recoiled.

"Sorry. I was...expecting-"

"As usual you expect more than you should. Look I'm not about to chastise you for something you clearly understand the ramifications of. Not while I have this much work under my nose." He picked up a piece of paper, flipping it over to continue writing. **"I apologise that I'll be using your office for the next few days, but I can't leave until the young master is at least well enough to converse with me."**

"That's fine. I barely use it anyway." Kaizen rubbed the back of his neck.

"I'm more than aware. There is still paperwork you will need to complete. But at present, I will let it slide, as we have more pressing matters. I can complete most of yours along with my own if I'm left alone."

"Ah. Thanks, Brom."

Brom waved his hand, an attempt to shoo this sloppy unprofessional lout out of his workplace. Kaizen obliged, swiftly disappearing to the safety of a quiet hall. The door clicked shut behind him. He silently sighed, an endless relief as he could now shirk his duties. He walked straight into a small room across from his office, there was no door, merely one open archway that led into a cramped kitchen, with a chipped wooden table, tiled floors, orange brick walls, and a tiny window that barely let in light. The cupboards were in disrepair, one door hanging on its hinges, thick claw marks strewn across the wood. A few pieces of paper were pinned to the wall beneath it behind an overly messy countertop.

He slid a chair back, almost falling into it as he tried to relax, it groaned under his weight, the metal along its edges doing all the work in holding itself together. He leaned forward, fingers intertwined while resting on the back of his head. The events of the past few days ran through his mind in succession. They were so careless, he felt like a fool for relying on a kid when he clearly was supposed to be the one protecting him. He closed his eyes, arms hanging limply toward the floor, cheek pressed firmly against the table. His leg ached uncomfortably, causing him to shift in his chair more than once.

"You haven't taken your pills darling." A booming deep voice came over his shoulder. He didn't move, a groan while turning the other way. A light pressure hit his shoulder twice; forcing him to turn again. He was met with a pool of black, a bright green staring back at him.

"...can we not today." Kaizen complained, back arched as he tiredly pulled his back against the chair. The person who stood beside him was overwhelmingly large, a white coat draped over a rotund belly, sleeves rolled half way, hair in thick dreads, a lighter brown, tied into a fountain on the top of his head, some left behind hanging in half a ponytail. His skin was dark, face rounded, comforting yet his expression so hard to read.

He took a seat across from the man, pink cup in hand. Filled to the brim with bitter black coffee. He sipped it quietly, watching as Kaizen wiggled in his chair, his hand now lightly scratching one of his pant legs. **"Fine"**. Two pills rolled across the table, this grown dragon struggled to pick them up, acting like a spoiled child, his tongue sticking out in disgust. It took him a full five minutes to put them in his mouth, a further ten to properly swallow them. His companion drank their coffee, without a word. Kaizen flicked his leg a little, waiting for these things to take effect. **"Sorry. I've made things hectic again."**

The man opposite him gave an approving nod, he took another sip, placing his cup down on the table, fingers loosely keeping hold of it in a more relaxed fashion. **"It's always hectic darling. We just take things as they come."**

"Where's Ty?"

"...out. I didn't want him panicking like he did with Lance, so he and Kiz went shopping." He took another sip, a hint of a smile **"we're out of coffee after all."**

"Of course." Kaizen chuckled faintly, slowly his leg calmed, the pain disappearing into nothingness. As much as he hated these pills, they did their job well. Enough that he could relax comfortably. **"I can't believe I screwed up this bad. If I'd just hung on for a couple more hours, then we'd have skipped this whole thing."**

"Blaming yourself won't change anything sweetie."

"...I know. I wish I'd noticed the flower thing sooner, and I should've done something about those hunters that kept following us. I just... I've screwed up more than normal. That poor kid just wants

someone to trust, and I've broken it multiple times." His hands ran across his face, back hunched, elbows reaching for the safety of the table. **"What do I do?"**

His companion released their cup, fingers interlaced as they lightly cracked their knuckles. **"You do what you've already been doing"**

"...that's it?"

"Kaizen. How would you go about this with Kimiko?"

"You'd remind me to tell her exactly what's on my mind, then wait till she cools down." He watched an eyebrow raise from across the table. **"But Ethan is-"**

"Also, a child. Just because he has a higher status than the rest of us, doesn't change the fact he is still a young individual. Who deserves the same basic decency we give to everyone else."

Kaizen shrunk further, arms slinking across the table until an audible thud was heard. His forehead collided with wood. **"...Yeah. Gods, the roots should swallow me whole."**

"From what you said he isn't holding anything against you after you did finally tell him the truth. Just do what you can when he asks." While Kaizen lay motionless, his companion enjoyed the cool breeze from the open window, his chair purposefully close by so as to take advantage of it. A sweet scent filled the kitchen as the wind picked up a few flowers growing along the outer kitchen wall. **"You should rest while Brom is helping with your paperwork."**

"I feel weirdly energized. So, until Ethan gets up, or Gabranth moves I'm... not really sure what to do."

The man stood, quietly placing his now empty mug on the cluttered countertop, the floor creaking with each step as he walked to the other side of the table. **"Have you checked in with Kimiko?"**

Kaizen raised an eyebrow. **"Yeah, she's with Ethan. She's the same as normal."**

"Is she?" he asked, a knowing look.

Thoughts whirled, she was kind of down, but she still made those sly faces, jokes, surely, she was fine, it wasn't the first time Ethan had gotten injured while in her company, she rarely cared about stuff like that- His eyes widened, he was doing it again, assuming things. He was given a light pat on the shoulder before his companion wandered out the door. **"Thanks, Tama"** Kaizen smiled, a nod returned before Tama's footsteps echoed through the hall. Kaizen took a moment before following suit.

As he stood outside the room Ethan slept in, he watched for a moment. Kimiko sat there, silent, she didn't move, wasn't being her usual energetic self, she was just...deflated. He frowned, hesitant to walk inside for the moment, the roles reversed from earlier.

Kimiko quietly stared into space, her head still in one hand, legs crossed on the small wooden stool she sat on. Her finger lightly tapped her face in a pattern, her raised foot bounced every now and then. Her active nature still apparent despite forcing herself to stay seated. She'd barely noticed that a few hours had passed by. As she noticed a spot of red on the bandages covering Ethan's side, she stood herself up, carefully taking the time to redress and clean the wound, she was particularly gentle, fast, as though

she'd done this multiple times prior. She took a seat once again, releasing a near silent sigh. Her nose upturned with that disinfectant smell one would get in a hospital setting. She tapped her fingers a moment, leaning over the bed, opening the window a crack. Enough to let in a small breeze, refreshing that once stale air. As she resumed her previous position something hard tapped her back. A strange sloshing sound. She glanced behind her, spotting Kaizen holding three bottles of wine.

The two sat on the floor, stool pushed to the corner of the room, the sun lingering high. Kimiko held one bottle in her hand, taking a swig with a grin on her face. Kaizen did the same, though he drank considerably less. **"Heh, if you hate it that much why are you drinking it?"** Kimiko teased, watching him grimace.

"Cause it's the only one we had." He poked his tongue out **"it's too sweet."**

"I like the sweet ones." Kimiko threw her head back, large gulps consuming half a bottle in moments.

"You're gonna run out before we even start" Kaizen chuckled.

"It's fineeee" she gleamed, relaxed, comfortable, bottle resting on the floor, hand curled around the top. Staring quietly off into space again without realising.

"You, okay?" Kaizen asked.

Kimiko ignored him, taking another swig. She leaned her head back, swiftly glancing to the boy, upside down from her point of view. **"Yeah. It's just been a long day."** she murmured. Kaizen frowned. A *long* day.

"...it's been a while since we had a drink together." He whispered.

"It has." She played with her bottle, a genuine smile on her face. As Kaizen went to speak again, she chugged the remainder of her first bottle. Dropping it to the floor with a thud. She leaned his way, head resting against his arm. **"It's nice."** Her words were muffled, hard for him to hear. Kaizen took a bit longer to finish his, meanwhile Kimiko had picked up the spare, her tone becoming more chipper with each mouthful. She began doing the typical drunken antics she revelled in, singing badly, dancing on the spot, insulting Kaizen while laughing manically and smacking him hard on the back.

Night had crept its way in, all the light of day gone, but the room felt warm. With three empty bottles, and another one added for good measure, Kimiko was out, sleeping comfortably on the floor, hand still clinging to her last drink. Kaizen smiled, standing in search of a blanket he could throw on her. He disappeared from the room, not even tipsy.

The chirp of crickets seeped in from the crack in the window, a beautiful full moon hovering above lit part of the floor. Barely covered by the tall trees that surrounded their home. The hall had emptied, everyone turning in for the night without complaints, all except one that continued the subtle scratch of pen on paper.

Twitch.

A finger moved.

Chapter 9

Breath caught, hands tensed, a pain sharp as their body shifted to the side. He winced, blurred vision revealed a dark room, nearly pitch black, a subtle light from outside the window. *How long has it been?* A soft groan escaped him, arms tensed as he attempted to sit up, his body refusing. He relented, staring toward the ceiling in silence. His mind was a mess, struggling to distinguish shapes. He turned his head lightly, spying various silhouettes in the room. He could hear snoring, quiet, muffled. Something was moving, tall, bulky. It loomed over him, staring. He couldn't focus, eyes wide, stinging from exhaustion.

It was back. That horrid all-consuming shadow that plagued his dreams. Why was it here? Why was it staring so intently at him? He tried to speak, nothing came out, instead his breathing intensified, chest heaving, his head lightened, dizzy. It came closer, every part of him screaming as he had no ability to move. His shoulders steeped in blue, a vague light warded this figure off, they fled back, out of view. Everything became heavy, dark, his mind deciding it'd had enough as he lost all sense of consciousness.

Kaizen stood outside the door blanket in hand, he watched as Gabranth's room door pulled shut. Confused, he took a moment before returning to Kimiko, he carefully put the blanket over her, checking on the boy after. He seemed okay, though his breathing was a tad odd. His shoulders were tinted blue, not seeping out, but strangely alight. A little concerned, he left the room, swiftly heading for Tama's office down the hall.

The following day was much like the last, Tama in his diligence kept a close eye on both his patients, while Kimiko and Kaizen took a more relaxed stance, leaving Ethan on his own periodically while they grabbed a meal. Like the children they were, they were pampered by Tama, who cooked, cleaned, pulled fresh vegetables out of his garden, and saw to everyone else's needs during the day. Most of which was Ty creating some kind of havoc outside, be it getting himself stuck in a tree, or injuring himself while playing a game with his similarly blue haired friend.

As morning turned to afternoon, Tama knocked on the door next to Kaizen's office, no response, he quietly pushed it open, spotting a large gruff man quietly sitting on the bed, idly staring into space. The fringe of his hair messy, arm red, still bleeding. His knuckles white, tense for too long.

Tama strolled into the room, placing a small stool he had tucked under one arm. He put some bandages, a small basin with water, and a needle and thread beside them both. He sat across from the man, in clear view. His expression stone faced, yet the air around him calming. **"Is it okay if I change those?"** he asked, pointing to the dripping arm. The man obliged, silently obliging. While the doctor did his job incredibly well, he struggled to look at the wound for long, oftentimes cleaning it while glancing elsewhere, checking it when required. It was swift, quickly rewrapped after being restitched in a few different places, it was almost as though the objects moved on their own. Tama carried a weak demeanour afterward.

"Are you okay?" Gabranth asked, his voice tired, low.

"Mm. Blood makes me...uneasy" he cleaned his hands swiftly, pushing everything else to the other side of the room. **"How are you?"** he asked calmly.

Gabranth fidgeted, staring at his hands for a time. **"I'm fine. Is he?"**

"He's okay. He stirs for a few minutes periodically, it's likely he'll wake up soon"

He watched this man shrink in his chair, visibly relieved though nervous. **“You can sit in the room if you want to.”** Gabranth shook his head, his hands clasped even tighter.

“He’s scared of me.” His tone pained; he’d become oddly small despite his bulky frame. **“I don’t blame him.”**

“If you change your mind. You know where he is.” He stood himself up, taking a quick glance around the room. **“It’s lovely outside today.”** He scooped up the items he’d brought inside, the floor creaking under foot, the window behind Gabranth opened by itself. He’d turned to look at it, surprised. As he turned to speak, Tama was gone. The door ajar. He awkwardly sat there, watching the slim piece of wood that was once closed. A now open invitation despite the fact he wasn’t supposed to be here.

He could hear people walk by, consistent steps from three people, sometimes a fourth. Running from two at one point with some kind of chipper excitable conversation happening somewhere down the hall. He hadn’t moved, quietly sitting in his spot. Part of him wanted to poke his head out, but with a lighter atmosphere, he felt out of place. That whisper never left. It hovered over him like a dark cloud, though quieter than before. It was forever looming in the back of his thoughts whenever he struggled to focus on something else. He tried to focus on pain, it never lasted, he didn’t feel anything, focusing on the house, he felt uncomfortable, an intruder in an otherwise happy home.

He slipped a hand into his pocket; hand tenderly wrapped around a small silver pocket watch. It was shiny, well cared for, the chain still in perfect condition, not a single flaw on the outside. Its front was decorated with the same symbol tattooed on his shoulder. He ran his finger along it.

The day lingered onward, long, tiring for most. Evening hit, the house was in an uproar, the excitement real, despite the noise Kaizen wasn’t heard until a few hours later. The most delectable smells wafted through the house, the kitchen brimming with life, intrigue, minor arguments over taste testing, and a loud stern warning to all as Brom took charge. Everyone was seated, purposefully placed at the table in an order that wouldn’t cause tension, each plate so carefully placed, not a single vegetable or spec of juice out of place. A high-class meal the group rarely indulged in. Brom hadn’t missed a detail, each meal was appropriately portioned, nothing missing, one was even placed aside in case Ethan woke. Kaizen picked up Gabranth’s, giving a swift smile as he took off with it.

The door was easily pushed open as Kaizen barrelled in, extra cautious to not drop the meal in hand. A thought crossed him that it felt lighter than it should. **“Hey!”**

The room was quiet, a little brighter, the window pushed open a little more than earlier, Gabranth sat on the bed, pocket watch in hand, he looked up briefly, sad eyes. **“I’ve got food”** Kaizen tried to show it off, even Gabranth couldn’t pretend it didn’t look tantalising. But he wasn’t sure he deserved it.

“I’m not hungr-”

“I’ll leave it here. Make sure you eat it. I’ll pick up the plate later” Kaizen cheerily ran back off to the kitchen, floor boards threatening to break under foot, plate left on the bed. Gabranth sighed, he stared at the meal opposite him, A large baked salmon fillet surrounded by a wonderful array of fresh roasted vegetables. The scent of honey and ginger permeated his room.

The table in the kitchen was similarly presented, Ty’s food was cut into playful shapes, his vegetables non-existent, instead it carried a thick sauce. Kaizen’s stacked high, second plate on the side. It took all his restraint not to swallow it all down in one bite. Kimiko had a reasonable size; it was enough that she’d

be full without stealing from anyone else. A glass of white wine poured with each adult meal, leaving Kaizen and Ty with a lemon flavoured water.

It took no time for each plate to be licked clean. A collective happy sigh echoing throughout the room. **"Thank you for cooking darling."** Tama was the first to stand, he made his way to the sink before Brom stepped in front.

"Ah! No, you don't. You get the night off." Tama was promptly ushered out of the kitchen. The man, while bewildered, was unable to do more than go back to his office. Everyone else scattered, all giving a rushed thanks while desperately trying to avoid responsibility. Brom began sorting the dishes with no complaint. It wasn't long before their kitchen looked better than it had in months, the floor, countertop, dishes, and table were spotless, the hanging cupboard door now properly screwed back in, his skill at both cooking, and cleaning felt somewhat magical, everything flawless.

"Belesprit" A commanding voice came from his pants pocket while watering the flowers on the table. His panic was immediate, swiftly locking himself in the office.

As night claimed all light, the house became silent. The subtle ambience of pen on paper hinted from the corner of the hall, while Kimiko snored on the floor of Ethan's room, another bottle of wine in hand, three empty ones on the floor, a stupid smile on her face. The majority had gone to bed, leaving a calm atmosphere. Kaizen roamed the dark corridor, a mix of boredom and curiosity as he cautiously opened his office door. The room was lit by candlelight, not overly bright, but enough that one could read. Brom sat at the desk, busy, tired, hair a tad askew as though he'd fallen asleep briefly. His glasses hung at the tip of his nose, face pointed down at another stack of papers. He did not look up as the sloppy dragon meandered closer. The floorboards squeaked loudly until he settled against the wall, arms folded. The scribbling stopped; hand loosened, the overly decorated silver and amethyst pen lightly touched the desk. **"Yes?"** He asked, now directing his attention Kaizen's way.

The man smiled awkwardly, nervous. **"Uh. I figured it was worth talking to you about a couple of things before everything gets out of hand."**

"If you're talking about his father, I've already made arrangements for that."

Kaizen stiffened, eyes wide. **"You told them-"**

"Only what was necessary." Brom shifted in his chair, fingers interlaced, one leg crossed the other. **"They are aware a *human*, helped save an *elf*. And was branded a traitor for that act. With my recommendation, he can live in the Celestial City. Or he can stay here."**

Kaizen's relief was evident, the back of his head hit the wall, sliding down gently until he sat on the floor.

"They don't know the young master is here. Master Fi'ssure won't let this slide if he finds out." He lowered his head, two fingers slid to the bridge of his nose, he rubbed it for a time before adjusting his glasses. **"I'm counting on you if things go wrong."**

"Yeah. I know." He clapped his hands together, a goofy smile on his face. **"But we'll be fine. We're always fine. By the time anything comes out, he'll probably be back at home."**

Brom rolled his eyes, of course a serious conversation would be turned into a joke. **"Was that all?"** he asked, carefully picking up his pen. Kaizen's lower lip upturned, eyes skyward. He had another thing on

his mind when he'd come in, but was struggling to remember it. It seemed important, something from a while back he'd forgotten to say. He began tapping a finger on his chin, foot on the floor, head on the wall. A culmination of multiple noises all infuriating the one doing paperwork. **"Just come back when you remember. That noise is going to drive me insane."** He growled.

Kaizen jumped back to his feet, making a swift exit. **"Okay, I'll come back in the morning."** His body merged with the darkness as he pulled the door shut. His thoughts at ease, enough that fatigue lingering through the day began to hit, a nap sounded nice. While he pondered what he'd forgotten before entering the room, he passed by Gabranth's room, the door ajar, empty plate on the floor, bed occupied, the subtle sound of quiet breath, a lingering smell of antiseptic. He politely picked up the dish, pulling the door closed behind him to give him some privacy. He took a quick trip to the kitchen, dropping the plate off in an empty sink. A yawn escaped him, the idea of bed tantalizing. Hands stuffed in pockets, he passed Ethan's door, a beautiful light blue flickered across the room. Kaizen paused. Blue?

Inside was brightly lit, vibrant transparent ribbons circled the room, a mist filled out the floor, barely covering Kimiko. A consistent swirling motion cascaded throughout the space, a mesmerising sight no one else was supposed to see. Ethan was in the centre of it all, eyes closed, hand outstretched, other settled on his side. Each injury glowed, tiny balls of light floated up vanishing to nothing. A small feminine figure held onto his fingers, flickering consistently as if struggling to hold shape. Butterflies filled the room, creating a calming, lively atmosphere. Kaizen was spellbound, watching the whole thing from the doorway, unwilling to make a sound. He'd seen him do something similar before, back when he broke down in tears. But this time, he had such a peaceful smile on his face. He was enjoying this. The anxiety began to hit him, this power was his life source, that reminder never left, beautiful as it was, he couldn't understand how easily he could put that life at risk. Not after he'd lost so much during a fight only days ago. He paused, he remembered what he wanted to say earlier, Ethan's *condition*, he moved to leave, carelessly pushing the door further, a loud creak broke the silence. Every spec of blue pulled to one spot, vanishing in an instant, the boy's eyes wide, cheeks red, head turned to him. **"Kaizen? Uh.... wh-what... are you doing here?"** he stammered out.

He halted abruptly, caught in the act. He could tell Brom later, instead choosing to walk inside, carefully stepping around the drunk woman on the floor. He gave an awkward smile. **"Sorry for the intrusion."** He rubbed the back of his neck while sheepishly avoiding eye contact. **"I couldn't sleep. Then I saw...that, so I came to see how you were doing."**

Ethan's brows raised, his arms dropped into his lap. **"Oh... uh. Thanks"** he gave a relaxed smile; cautiously shuffling about in the bed in order to get comfortable. He flinched as Kaizen spoke again.

"How're you holding up?" The man watched this boy fidget, his smile turned uncanny at moments.

"I'm...fine." His tone shaky, that unnatural strain.

Kaizen sat himself on the edge of the bed, facing the boy with more of a stern expression. He watched him hesitantly look his way. **"You shouldn't be using your ability so carelessly. Not while you're in this state."**

Ethan lowered his head. **"I just... needed it. For a little bit..."** his fingers curled, shoulders tensed, Kaizen could see his knee bouncing under the blanket. **"...it helps dull the pain."** He whispered.

Kaizen's heart sank. This kid put on a brave face, but it was obvious from the outside he wasn't okay. **"Can I check?"** he asked, pointing to the bandage. Ethan gave a brief nod. The man judiciously removed his bindings, he was caught by surprise, something Ethan had noticed. **"Wow, they're closed. Geez. I wish I had that kind of regeneration time."** He began rewrapping it, careful as it was still a tender area. **"Just don't move around too much or it could reopen."**

"Yeah." The boy played with his fingers until Kaizen was done. He stretched himself out, standing on his feet, a loud yawn. It was a load off, just seeing this kid awake, it meant the following days were going to be less tense. **"By the way"** Ethan started. **"I feel like I always see you in bandages, but your dragon form didn't have any wounds."** he said quietly.

Kaizen chuckled **"Yeaaaahh I've been told I'm a bit of a clutz. Sometimes they're new, if I fall over or something"**

Ethan chuckled quietly, **"Ah, now it all makes sense."** He teased.

Kaizen sneered at him, **"You can't tell me that while looking like this"** he pestered back while pulling a bandage off his wrist, exposing a hint of gold. **"You probably saw this earlier, but some of my chipped scales don't transform properly"** the boy drew closer, curious.

"It's like you're made of gold. Even like this"

"Haha. I kind of am." He paused for a moment, watching as a little blue butterfly settled on Ethan's shoulder. **"...be careful with your ability. I know it's strong, and you've got a good grasp on it, but..."** he leaned down again, lightly placing a hand on his other shoulder **"Don't lose whatever years of life you have left."** He felt a lump in his throat, the words catching. **"It's precious, don't let anyone else take it"**

Ethan nodded **"I know."** he swiftly looked away, like he'd done something wrong. An awkward silence hung in the air.

"Uuuugh there's no more wine left." A familiar complaint drifted over. A bottle rolled to the side, hitting Kaizen's foot.

"Sounds like someone's up. I'll let you go back to sleep." He took little time helping Kimiko to her feet, her arm lifted over his shoulder as he bent to her level. **"C'mon, you can go sleep in your own room."**

The girl looked disgusted, lip upturned, eyes narrow **"What? But-"**

"No buts. Come on. You need to sleep this off"

She was forcefully dragged out of the room, her arm flailing, still clutching an empty bottle. **"Noooo, I wanna" "NO!"**

As the two walked down the hall, another pair of steps trailed nearby, they stopped at the doorframe, just out of view, an enticing smell permeating the air. Ethan curiously leaned back, prompting the figure to come forward. The moonlight revealed long-pointed ears, Ethan recoiled. He looked elsewhere, his breath picked up, that nervousness so outward that the person standing across from him decided to make

their introduction short. They stepped closer, short strides, black dress shoes clinked against wood, their glasses glinted in the little light available, hiding his eyes. In his hands was a plate, recently heated.

"I imagined you may want a meal." They bowed their head, placing the meal nearby. They took a step back, ready to leave as their job was done, but a voice stopped him.

"Thank you." Brom paused, hand gripped the handle of the door. After a few moments of silence, he lightly pulled the door closed.

"You're Brom? Right?" Ethan asked, another pause, the door pushed open.

"Yes?"

"...You wanted to talk to me?" Ethan asked quietly.

"I do." He watched the boy tense, he gave a very soft, kind smile. Removing his glasses to showcase his face, hiding nothing. **"But I think that would be better suited for when both of us are better prepared."** He spoke quietly.

Ethan's relief was almost immediate. He reached for the plate, his feet touching the floor for the first time in days. He picked it up with a shaky arm, but smiled as he noticed the thick piece of salmon. **"This looks amazing."**

Brom's smile widened. **"I hope you enjoy it."** He stared at him unintentionally, that bright blue butterfly still perched on his shoulder, a light so warm, it reminded him of a scene he'd seen years back, a beautiful elven woman whose signature contained that same shape. It took him a moment to realize his rudeness; quietly pulling the door too.

The light of morning brought forth a large array of noise, the subtle ambience of the birds, the wind brushing through the tree tops, combatted by the idle chatter of people waking from their slumber. One pair of footsteps stormed through the hall with a fury, heavily thwacking the wooden boards without one consideration of those still sleeping. They skidded to a stop in front of one closed door, violently throwing it open. **"MORNING!"** her shrill voice boomed through both the room and hall.

The boy jumped, an immediate wince as he'd stretched somewhere tender. **"...Morning"** he groaned.

Kimiko's ears perked up, she skipped across the room, plonking herself near the end of his bed, his legs swiftly pulled toward his chest in an attempt to stop her from sitting on them. **"So how was near death huh? Have fun?"** she grinned.

The boy's face dropped, that annoyance was like coffee to the girl. She seeped in it, her glee pulling the prior night's hangover far into the corner of her mind. The look, the silence, she knew what he wanted, but she'd never give in. She did the only thing she knew, to double down. **"You're screwed. You can't leave the bed, and I got nothing else to do but talk to you ALL day"** she lowered her eyelids half way, eyebrows raised, lips curled so far it felt comical.

Ethan chuckled, a little at first, then it grew to a full-blown belly laugh, his hands gripping his sides, trying desperately to stifle the proceeding pain. It took him moments to catch his breath, one hand lightly

pointing in her direction. **“Ow... your face. Haha. Gods my side hurts.”** He shook his head, a giggle still battling against his sense of self preservation.

Kimiko softened, she hadn't even realized as she sweetly smiled back. One leg crossed the other, a hand slid up to her face, becoming her chin's resting place. **“Good job, on getting here in one piece”**

His smile waned. Upper lip trembled lightly, eyes welled up, shoulders raised, head lowered. His hands immediately tried to cover his face, wiping his eyes while forcing a smile. Kimiko could only stare as this boy tried so hard to hide his pain, not just physical. He'd never broken down in front of her before, he'd been angry, happy, a little down, but she'd never seen him cry, not once. The stifled whimpers covered by fake chuckles drowned her in guilt. He was just a kid, despite him not wanting to believe it, he wasn't a hardened warrior who could take death as a light subject. **“I-I don't...this is just...heh, damn it. Please stop-”** Her hands moved on their own, swiftly curling around him, pulling his head into her shoulder.

His crying was strangely quiet, he hugged her back, gripping her shirt tightly, as if she'd disappear. She couldn't say anything, how could one find the words, waiting in silence, her shoulder wet, heart in tatters. *I'm sorry Ethan. I'm so sorry.* She lightly rubbed his back.

The two had sat this way for long enough that others walked through the hall, Kaizen lingered in the doorway, cautiously waiting as he too realized he couldn't tell how hurt this kid really was. As they finally pulled away, Ethan rubbed his eyes, he struggled to smile, though tried anyway. **“Sorry”** he mumbled, his gaze elsewhere.

“For what? Getting my shirt wet? I'm home, I'll just change.” She waved him off; it was all she knew to lighten the mood. **“We can't let this kinda thing stop us from hanging out right?”** she grinned. It was awkward, but she hid her own insecurities well.

“If you need some time to yourself, we can give you some space.” Kaizen closed the distance; it was barely a few steps before he reached the bed side, hands comfortably perched in overly baggy brown pant pockets.

The boy looked between the two, smile genuine, eyes puffy, red. **“...I'd like the company”** tone shaky.

Kimiko clapped her hands together; a burst of excitement took her over. **“In that case, have I got some stories for you, you wanted to know about Kaizen and me, right?”** her smile sinister, she glanced at Kaizen. **“SOOO....”** She started, an open tooth grin so wide it felt unnatural. **“Let me tell you about this one time, when Kaizen was fighting these bandits in the middle of the road”**

Kaizen stiffened. **“Oh no.”** he groaned, his head fell forward, eyes closed, both hands covering his face.

“Oh yes~” Kimiko hummed. She made herself more comfortable, leaning backwards, one hand in the air, fully prepared to showcase her storytelling ability to the fullest. She hoped it'd cheer him up, while also getting some joy from Kaizen's public embarrassment. **“Three of us were picking up stuff for Tama, and these bandits came out of the bushes or something on our way home. We all had a ton of bags and shit, so instead of having everyone put stuff down, we figured one person could take them out.”** She raised her hand, turning it into a fist. **“Rock, paper, scissors decided the challenger.”** Her hand came down; all but two fingers closed. **“Kaizen won. For the first time ever.”**

Kaizen shrunk further. His stature shorter and shorter with each word out of her mouth. He cringed, the look on his face begging for her to stop, her volume increased. Excitedly she emphasized her words by

using both hands. **“Obviously things went kind of typical to start with, a few guys got thrown around, Kaizen fell over. The first stupid thing that happened was when this big guy came up. He swung this large hammer around like he was some bigshot, no joke, it hit Kaizen and just fell apart. The guy looked like he’d shit himself.”** Ethan began to chuckle, he sat with his arms curled around his legs, listening intently. **“They threw some punches; someone screamed for their mommy. Gosh, then in the midst of the fight. Everything goes silent, and everyone stopped to stare at-”**

“NO!” Kaizen waved both his arms, swiftly pulling himself into the conversation. **“Can we skip this one please?”**

“No way, this is just too funny. SO! Anyway, the thing everyone was staring at was Kaizen who managed to get himself stuck in the ground head first.” One could hear the eyeroll as Kaizen desperately tried to shield his own ego. **“His legs were just flailing about, it was HILARIOUS!”** she giggled.

“How’d you manage that?” Ethan asked between the odd chuckle, his face had lit up, that hint of sadness lingering in the back of his eyes.

Kaizen rubbed the back of his neck, he didn’t want to continue, but he could see Kimiko egging him on from the side. He gave in, his body slumping. **“I uh... went in for an attack, missed...and all the force hit the ground”** he muttered.

“He COMPLETELY overestimated his attack, he hit the ground so hard it made a hole large enough to fit his torso, and then couldn’t get back out.” “UGGGGHHHHH Enough of that one.” Kaizen growled, face red.

Ethan smiled, he relaxed a little more on the bed. **“You really are clumsy, I always thought you had a bit more grace when out on the battlefield.”** He chuckled quietly to himself.

“Hey! I was just having an off day is all.”

“Day? You remember that other time?” Kimiko snickered.

“Oookay, I think that’s enough embarrassment. I’m going to go check up on everyone else and grab some food. I’ll be back in a few.”

The other two whined in unison as Kaizen wandered back out the door. Back arched, feet scuffing the floor. **“Well, no reason to stop, so there was this other time, we were heading to an important meeting-”**

He pulled the door shut. Happy to immediately muffle the sound of a chipper Kimiko having fun at his expense. The quiet of the hall was a welcomed relief, he drank it in, he took only a few steps before stopping, a figure leaned against the wall, the sun shone on the opposite side of the house, leaving the hallway particularly dark. Their arms folded, bandages visible on a forearm. Muscles thick, shirt red, open at the chest. Head lowered, eyes toward the floor.

Kaizen took another few steps from the door. At a distance in case Ethan could hear. **“You shouldn’t skulk around like that. You’ll give off the wrong impression.”** He said quietly.

Gabranth glanced up, visibly nervous. **“Skulking?”** he asked, only just realising how things looked. **“...I guess it does look like that.”** He murmured. His posture ridged, uneasy. He radiated nervousness to the point it gave a similar anxiety to passersby. **“...Sorry. I didn’t”**

“You can only hear so much from out here. Why don’t you step inside for a bit? I’m sure he’d appreciate it.” Kaizen gave a large smile, happily offsetting the load of unease. This didn’t do much for the other party, his arms tightened, shoulders raised. He looked elsewhere, lips pressed. Lingering in the silence, unwilling to answer. His eyes glazed over, like someone who’d long given up. **“I’m not going to force you.”** Kaizen said quietly. **“But taking the coward’s way out will only get you so far.”**

The man’s fist clenched, knuckles white. **“...I know that.”** His tone was a mix of angry and worried. **“He’s... so big now. He’s covered in scars despite still being a kid.”** He tensed more, the fresh scent of iron filling the hall as the bandage reddened, his fingernails digging into skin. **“If I was just-”** he paused, the words no longer willing to come out. He slumped against the wall.

“What’s done is done. But you can still choose what you do now.” Kaizen stepped past him. **“Just think about what you want to say while he’s still here to hear it.”** His hand grazed the man’s shoulder; he patted it twice before continuing on his way. **“Oh, I almost forgot.”** He spun on his heel. **“We spoke to the council about your...uh. Situation. They’ve agreed to let you live there, though you’ll be restricted on where you can go. Or you can stay here, and help us with keeping the line”**

The air thickened, rich in apprehension from one individual. Their brows furrowed, covered by a brown fringe that fell to the whims of gravity. **“...war... or contempt huh?”** he chuckled awkwardly. **“I guess I can’t go home anymore.”** It felt as though another presence loitered in the walls, curled around this figure.

Kaizen felt the discomfort hit him like a wave. His instincts urged him to end the conversation. **“Unfortunately, that stunt you pulled branded you a traitor. It’s not safe to be anywhere else. I have someone scouting the situation in Lumire. We’ll keep you updated.”**

“...thanks.” His words felt empty. Kaizen had given him a very simple nod, disappearing into the kitchen. Cupboard doors squeaked on their hinges; items shuffled about in the distance. Gabranth returned his gaze to the floor. His legs bent, back sliding down the wall, he settled on the long wooden panels, arms rested against his knees. Head hitting the wall, staring up to the ceiling. Eyes closed. He let out a long-exhausted sigh.

His shadow grew beneath him, a constant whisper of latent guilt, the word *fault* thrown in his direction from all sides. The subtle sound of the boy’s laugh pushed it to the side, a quiet he’d not had since their meeting in Nova. He lingered on his voice, that elusive gravel in his tone, the curiosity in his words, the joy in conversation. It contrasted the younger pitch he so clearly remembered, it felt like he never changed, yet he was so different. Fully grown, with a past he barely interacted with. What was he supposed to say? What words could possibly express everything going through his mind all at once. Would stepping in that room...change anything?

He raised a hand; two fingers rested at the bridge of his nose. A sting of pain at the front of his forehead. His own anxiety gave him a headache, he needed guidance. **“Aleena”** he whispered, desperately praying for some inkling that she could hear him. **“What do I do?”**

He steeped in his worries, a hint of a voice long past reminding him of simpler times. *He adores you.* A woman. Graceful, beautiful, comforting. Heart heavy, his hand fell to the floor, he forced himself up. It took only a few steps before he faced the door. The sound of laughter, conversation muffled behind this thick piece of wood. His hand trembled, tentatively reaching for the doorknob, he faltered, chest near exploding through sheer terror. He moved regardless, this time gripping it firmly. He took a breath in, it turned, the creak so loud it battled the heartbeat in his ears. The room fell silent, the door no longer blocking the view of either party. A lump sat in his throat. Struggling to speak, this mass of bulging muscles, found himself shaking in place. **“H-hey.... kiddo.”**

Ethan's eyes widened, mouth agape. Body still. No one dared move, no one spoke, Kimiko stared in an awkward silence, watching Ethan with a visible sweat on her brow. Gabranth's heart beat loudened as time felt still, *this was a mistake* consumed all thought. He couldn't find the strength to move forward, nor back. He was perpetually stuck in an invisible cage of social expectation.

The sheets rustled, one foot tapped against the wood, it groaned under the weight as the boy stood. **“You...”** his voice thick with malice. A fist clenched, his other foot hit the floor, faster, he hurled himself in Gabranth's direction, he barely realized as something struck him hard in the cheek. He staggered back, a flicker of blue entering his peripheral vision. It stung, a strange sensation that spread throughout his jaw. He fell backward, caught off guard. **“WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING HERE!”** Ethan yelled. The anguish hit harder than any punch.

Kimiko scurried off the bed, forcing herself between them. **“Ethan stop it”**

“It's okay.” Gabranth raised a hand, the taste of iron a small relief. He deserved this. No matter how far it went, he couldn't back down. He raised his head, staring in Ethan's direction.

The boy pulled forward, inching closer, eyes narrow, fist raised. **“Answer my DAMNED question.”** He growled.

“To make sure you were okay.” Gabranth slowly raised.

Ethan's face darkened, he pushed past Kimiko, one foot forward, his body twisted. **“You gave up the right for that a LONG time ago!”** Another punch knocked Gabranth down, fist dripping a thick blue. Eyes burning, a face mimicking the one Gabranth showed that night. His hair lifted in parts, a tint rising up through the roots, steam floated off his shoulders.

The man felt a ripple of pain all the way from his jaw to his fingers. His breath was caught, lost in the pain that dulled everything else. He coughed once, hand firmly gripping his knee as he once again attempted to stand. **“I know.”** He staggered, head upright. Ethan the only thing in his sights. **“But still. I don't want to make the same mistake twice.”** His lower lip raised, brows furrowed. He didn't mind getting hit again, the bruise on his cheek a worthy price for a shred of time to see this kid all grown up. He could see that child still there, his mind was filled with thoughts of them, their tiny hand grasping for his. Their voice as they called for him, their smile with a missing tooth at the front. It was replaced by him as he was now, laying on the floor in a pool of his own blood. Tears welled up, he found himself trembling. The colour drenching the room terrified him, unable to stop the image of a woman vanishing from his grip in a swirl of blue. **“If I lost you too I....”** he couldn't finish his sentence. He couldn't admit to himself it was a possibility. For so long it hadn't even crossed his mind, it wasn't possible, he'd be there, safe.

The ire faded, Ethan's face contorted, pained, the anguish so strong his legs gave out. He dropped to the floor with a thud, barely sitting as his hands caught him. His breath heavy, the steam fizzled to nothing, he hunched forward, the pitter of tears hitting wooden boards. **"Why.... are you here now?"** he whimpered. **"After all this damned time?"** The longer he sat there, the more he broke down, tears flowing freely, barely getting air through the strain of holding things back. He coughed, the tension making it hard to breathe, he shook his head as he forced himself to his feet. **"I...need some air."** He muttered, swiftly vacating the room. His steps loudly thudded through the hall haphazardly. The pressure in the room persisted, the two that remained were silent, unsure what to say, how to act. Kimiko was torn between chasing after him, and staying put. Gabranth was doing all he could to keep himself together, his heart threatened to escape his chest. His worst fears realized as now there was no doubt.

"You should go after him." Kimiko whispered, loud enough for the man to hear.

"I don't."

"I don't care." She was blunt, cold, fighting back against her own wants as she got in Gabranth's face. **"I know who you are, I know what Ethan thinks about you, and I don't give a flying rat's ass, how much it hurts you, you're GOING to go and talk to him, or I'm going to beat the shit out of you in his stead."**

The man was taken aback, a stern telling off one he hadn't expected.

She put both hands on her hips, glancing to the door, brows furrowed, concerned. **"Besides that, it looks like he opened a wound."**

A subtle breeze dove through the tops of the trees, the odd leaf pulled from its perch only to be dragged elsewhere. The fresh smell of morning dew hung in the air, two open doors led to an open living room, two couches placed around a table, both facing the porch. The sun had yet to reach this part of the house, shadows covered the wooden boards, seeping along the railing that was painted white. Parts of it missing, scratched off by claws, chunks broken as though something heavy had flown into it. Chips of paint revealing the oak colour beneath. Gabranth stood in the doorway, he could see the boy sprawled against the railing, one arm dangling while the other propped him upright. His head over the side, skin pale, swaying on his feet. Side red. A clear sign he should have stayed in bed. Yet despite his condition, he seemed content out here. His eyes closed, breathing steady, taking in the ambience of the forest at the edge of the house.

The man struggled to move, not wanting to ruin that shred of peace. Yet he knew he'd have too eventually. He watched him for a time, letting him bask in that glint of light as the sun crept a little further their way. Gabranth stepped forward, small, quiet. The lack of reaction gave him the confidence to take another. Soon he stood at the other end of the railing. Close, but not, somewhere he could say something without being too close. Ethan glanced his way; an exhausted groan escaped him. **"You again?"** He angled himself away, folding his arms over the railing while burying his head in them.

Gabranth's hands clasped together. **".... I couldn't.... let it end like that."**

"You ended it years ago" Each word is a reminder of his wrong doings. He knew, no one cast more blame than himself. He wasn't going to run from that. **"Why are you trying to make an effort now?"** Ethan asked, his voice carried through the gaps between flesh and railing.

Why hadn't he done it sooner? Because then it'd all have been for nothing. He'd have lost years, with nothing to show. And that fear was now a reality. That glimpse of freedom was gone, shredded the moment his son lay bleeding on the floor. **"It wasn't supposed to be for long. Then there you were...all grown up without me realising."** He whispered.

Ethan pulled himself upright, fists clenched. **"That's just an excuse. Why were you working with hunters?"** he asked, eyes narrow, lip upturned.

Gabranth smiled awkwardly, how foolish would it be to say the truth. He sighed. **"I... chose to."** *No more excuses.* He steeled himself for shame. **"It was that, or execution. That was my punishment after they found out I married your mother."**

Ethan looked confused at first, he shook his head. **"So, you turned on those who took you in, and went back to the humans instead?"** his tone had changed, strained, pained. **"You could've just come home."** The tears returned.

He looked at his hands. **"...I'm sorry. I couldn't go back to that house without her in it. Not like I was."** He braced himself, waiting patiently for the words he'd told himself countless times. **"That doesn't justify you having to capture and kill so many people just like her!"**

There they were. The bane of the last thirteen years, laid out in front of him. **"I know."** he'd always known, but that never helped him answer the question that came after. **"I just.... don't know...how to fix it"**

"You stop hiding behind apologies." Ethan glared at him. **"They don't fix the things you break."** He swayed in place, the odd wince, as he'd come to realize his own pain. A hand rested on his side, breath growing heavy before long. Gabranth moved to help him, but was immediately stopped by a raised hand. **"I'm fine. I can go back by myself."** he wobbled toward the door, almost falling once.

It took all of the man's self-control to stay put, merely watching as he hobbled back inside. **"Ethan."** Gabranth called, the boy stopped, not turning back, but waiting. **"I'll be here. If you need me"**

How unfair. How many days, years, how much heartache had crept in while waiting for those words. It seemed like a joke. Another taunt life threw his way, a vague hint of hope that'd be pulled away the moment someone dragged him home. His heart ached, head light, side in agony, he wanted to sit down and cry, but he'd done that twice now, it wasn't in him to do it again. He dare not move, the doorframe the only thing keeping him upright. He'd stood there a good few minutes, not a single word in response, but he could feel that man staring. With a quick glance over his shoulder, he glimpsed his father one more time. That face, so much like his own, those sad eyes, those broad shoulders, the person who threw away everything to make sure he was okay, just like he wanted. But he was so angry, that fury burned so deep, he wasn't there, when the pain was highest, nor when he woke up. He was never there. That trust was broken, torn apart with a punch to the gut. He stared at him a moment longer, looking for flaw, for a reason to continue to be furious, there were so many. Yet at the same time, something so deep inside him pleaded for him to make amends.

He didn't want to say it, he just wanted this conversation to end, to pretend nothing existed for a while. He tore his gaze away, hobbling through the house in the direction he came. He passed through an open arch, noise radiated to his right, he ignored it, his only task was to sit. The walk was long, the wall his support as he finally spotted the room Kimiko stood in. He wandered past her, flopping onto the bed as

she called his name. **"I'm fine."** His own voice betrayed him, he was emotionally done, merely wanting a moment for the world to stop throwing stuff his way. A twinge of contentment.

"Uh...huh." She was unconvinced, looking him over as red seeped onto the sheets. **"I'm going to get Tama"** she gave a wave, her steps quick as she darted out the door.

"Wait-" Ethan had barely been able to sit up, let alone speak. **"Annnnd she's gone."** He groaned. **"Ugh. It'd close soon anyway."** Strangely he didn't care, he was so drained that the pain in his side was just an extra, barely a distraction. He waited quietly, the window ajar, enough for the cool breeze to waft through. He closed his eyes, thoughts swirling. *I couldn't go back to that house without her in it.* He clenched his teeth. **"At least you had a choice."** He muttered. That frustration builds up in the pit of his stomach. He took a breath in, forcing himself to relax as his side ached.

Someone skipping merrily rang faintly in the distance, her gleeful plotting evident from afar. She returned swiftly, light on her feet. **"I'm back~"** She floated across the room, that smug grin he loathed.

"...welcome back" he raised a brow, curious as she'd come alone.

She plonked herself on the bed, palm up, in its centre was a small pink object. **"I got you a candy"** she hummed.

Ethan shifted his weight the other way, hand against his side. **"I'm good. I'm not really-"** something sweet hit his tongue, forcefully thrown in his mouth while Kimiko's hand stopped him from spitting it out.

"I. Got. A. Candy. For. You. To. Enjoy" She spoke through gritted teeth, her sneer made Ethan uncomfortable. She was probably trying to cheer him up in her own weird way.

He bit down on it, he'd just get rid of it the faster way, it took him seconds to swallow. Once he'd done so she let him go, chipper again. **"Happy?"** he glared. She eyed him expectantly; it put him on edge. Her smile widened, his arm went first, a tingle to start with, then all at once he felt nothing, he fell forward, his leg going next, unable to stop him from hitting the floor. One by one his limbs went numb, the pain he'd felt earlier had disappeared, a relief but at the same time, his new state of being was concerning.

"HAHA! You should see your face right now, you look hilarious." Cackles came from the bed, peering down at him like the monster she was. Where was the compassion he'd received earlier?

"...Kimiko?" He growled, the only thing working was facial features, though he felt a strain on his voice. **"The hell did you give me?"**

A once subtle sound of creaking wood turned loud as someone approached the two. **"It's a numbing candy."** The tone was oddly gentle, despite a booming presence. **"I'd prefer not to stitch you back together if you can feel it darling."** Tama stood inches from the patient, Ethan's eyes could only gaze so high, but the view from the floor was not a kind one. The already tall figure looked ominous, threatening. Ethan would've stiffened up if he had control of his limbs. All he could do was press his lips together while his inner voice screamed bloody murder.

"Oh yeah, you haven't met before." Kimiko raised a hand, pointing toward the goliath. **"This is Tama. He's pretty cool."**

While Tama lightly patted her head, Ethan's mind began connecting the dots. Tama, was her and Ty's dad. Their other dad, though this was not what he was expecting in the slightest." **Uh... hi. I'm Ethan.**" He stammered out.

"...We should get you off the floor." The man took a step back, one hand raised. Patterns lined his left arm, glowing green shimmering under his doctor's coat. Ethan's body lifted slowly, the surprise was immediate. He had no feeling in anything, which made the experience even stranger, once he was above the bed, he descended gently. **"It'll wear off in a minute sweetie. Try to relax, I'll get this sorted quickly."**

Ethan had little choice but to wait it out. Various medical objects flew overhead, a needle, thread, bandages, cloth, water, it was a strange sight to be sure. He couldn't feel a thing, everything merely did its task as precisely and swiftly as possible, he was lifted again to replace the bedsheet at the same time. The shock evident. **"There we go. Right as rain. Try not to move too much for a while."** Tama lowered his arm, a visible strain as he looked away from the blood-stained bandages.

"Thanks. I've never seen someone use telekinesis?" asked quizzically.

"Yeah, Tama doesn't like blood, so he works from a distance." Kimiko teased.

The big guy's fingers raised, tentatively tapping together in a nervous fashion. His face remained the same. **"Kimiko... he'll think I'm uncool."** He whispered in her direction. Ethan very much within earshot pretended not to hear it.

"PFFT no one is cooler than you. Obviously." She actively hugged Tama's side, he lightly tapped her back.

Their relationship stung, though Ethan smiled through it. **"Thanks for the help. I'm sorry for causing a fuss."**

"You're fine sweetie. I do have a bit on my plate, so I shall be off my loves." He let Kimiko go, her smile genuine as she took her place back on the edge of Ethan's bed.

The boy was less than pleased as he had no agency in his own movement for a while longer. As the heavy steps disappeared down the hall, Ethan's foot twitched. Slowly but surely, he got feeling back, but with it came pain. He attempted to sit himself up, the headboard pressed against his back, he groaned softly, one eye closed whenever he made a subtle adjustment to get comfortable. His mood had dipped, though he was comforted by Kimiko giving that goofy smile at the end of the bed. Her company was better than the silence of an empty room. Abruptly, she stood up, stretching her arms out high, back arched. **"I'm gonna workout. I'll be back in a bit."** She winked. Ethan barely got a chance to speak before she darted from the room *again*, hands cupped around her mouth. **"TY! WHERE ARE YOU? WE'RE PLAYING HIDE AND SEEK!"**

If anyone wasn't awake from the fight he had with his father, they sure were now. His head hit the wall just beyond the headboard, eyes skyward. So much for company, he was pushed aside so quickly when people had other things to do.

Kimiko had taken a detour, popping her head out the front door, barely catching the red shirt from the corner of her eye. Gabranth was seated on the step, half shaded, his legs basking in the sun. Head down, hands in his lap, lost in a maze of thoughts. He didn't move when a hand waved in front of him, he

remained still as something spoke in his ear. It wasn't until something landed in his hands that he snapped out of it. Puzzled, his fingers rubbed across dark brown leather, intricate designs across the front, though damaged at the edge. Various papers threatened to fall out the sides, a red ribbon carefully placed between the pages.

"It's his." Her voice caught his attention this time. He turned her way, the clear surprise on his face made her giggle. **"Don't tell him where you got it from. But it might help you understand him a bit more."**

Gabranth ran his palm across it, he tentatively opened the cover, curious. The first page was decorated with thorned vines, not one he'd recognised, a sketch of Ethan sat in the bottom centre, a refined skill the boy put time into. His hand grazed the page; the indentations of his musings scattered across the paper. It was there he noticed, despite such a detailed portrait, he didn't draw his eyes. He glimpsed the letters; with little hesitation he snapped the book shut. **"I can't-"** he turned to give it back, only to find he'd long been left to his own devices.

He held the book tenderly. His anxiety skyrocketed. What was he supposed to do with this? As he moved to stand, something caught his eye, a small piece of paper had fallen out. Old, tattered, the corners partially ripped or bent. The colour had faded a little, but the image was still visible. He picked it up, eyes wide. His son, only around ten years old, a massive grin on his face, while holding a metal object in both hands. Next to him was an older gentleman, a bit of a gut, but fairly well-built arms, a thick grey beard with a white streak, wearing a red cap. **"...Laz?"**

The sun was warm, it flooded every corner of the house, any open windows invited in a cool breeze. The walls were quiet, Kaizen had all but disappeared, as had Kimiko and Ty. Gabranth had snuck back into his room part way through the day, something Ethan barely noticed as he'd stayed in bed like he was supposed to, his boredom was rising rapidly. He couldn't go for a walk, he couldn't train, couldn't hunt, even drawing was out of the question as he had no idea where his belongings were. He couldn't even ask. Everyone had left him alone. All he could do was stare outside, or make shapes with his aura, something he'd already been chastised for.

He sighed heavily, leaning against the window, pushing it open a little further. That was the closest he could get to the outdoors right now, he could smell flowers, many, yet he couldn't see a lot of them from his window. The grass was thick; plants ran wild around the back of the house toward the forest. It was only trimmed closer to the part of the building that jutted out. He began to tap his fingers, his leg, a minor anxiety as he sat in this room for hours on his own. *Stay in bed.* He flinched, he had been told to stay put, he knew why, but it created an ache in his chest he didn't like. Confined to a room all over again.

He could hear one person making noise down the hall, it sounded like a pen and paper. That piqued his curiosity, if there was spare paper, he could draw, that'd solve one problem. The issue now was that in order to do that, he had to leave the room. No one had walked by in over an hour, no one had checked up on him either. It was like he was forgotten all over again.

He clenched a fist, a little walk couldn't do that much damage, right? He cautiously pushed off from the windowsill, the moment his foot hit the floor, he felt a wave of defiance surge through him. Kimiko always broke rules, right? No one would get that mad? He second guessed himself, but it didn't stop his foot from joining his first. One hand slid onto his knee, the other grasping the headboard, with a bit of strain he pulled himself up. His heart was pounding; he'd left the bed. He was doing something he was told not to,

while no one else was here. His mind was flooded with memories of him climbing out the window, running off to see his only friend.

The anxiety of his punishment lingered. A hand rested on his side, it did nothing to help the ache, but it made him more comfortable. With a slow shuffle, he made his way out of the room, head poked out the doorframe while looking for signs of life. His excitement spiked as he spotted nothing, a master plan contested by none. He continued on his way, the warm sun hitting his skin through the window. He stopped to take a moment, the front of the house was well kept, a nice clearing until nothing but trees.

“Young master?” Ethan’s body went cold. He dare not look. Surely this was why he was told to stay in the room, aside from recovery, because people who knew who he was were walking around. He hesitantly glanced their way, sweat trickling down the side of his cheek. **“Are you okay?”** he was met with a familiar face, eyes hidden behind the white glare on his glasses. Hair combed back, clothes pressed, not a thread out of place. A stack of papers under one arm.

“Brom” Ethan whispered. He waited for the anger, judgement, scolding. Instead, he got...a smile?

“Would you care for a drink?” The elven man asked. Ethan, unsure how to proceed merely nodded, maybe he’d tell him off after they sat down?

He was proven wrong again, the two sat in the kitchen, a mug across from each of them. Brom sipped his with an air of dignity, reminiscent of family members Ethan rarely saw. He eyed his own drink, unsure how to feel about drinking something warm. It was like a thin soup, he sniffed it first, cautiously trying not to come off as brutish. He sipped it, the taste was mild, floral, with a hint of something sweet. As he swallowed, he could feel a warmth radiate through his body, setting him at ease. **“This is really good.”** He spoke without thinking, Brom was pleased to hear it.

“While I’m here you can ask for one any time.” He said quietly.

“The others are out for work; I apologise I did not check up on you earlier. I’ve been particularly busy.” Brom bowed his head, fingers cupped around his mug, his posture perfect.

“That...explains a lot.” Ethan began bouncing his leg, the anxiety hitting, held back by the drink in front of him. It was just him, his father, and another elf in the house. A situation he’d prefer not to be in. His mind began to spiral, but before he could fall too far, a loud sigh came from the other side of the table.

“Ugh. I told him to tell you first” Brom looked unamused, glaring off to the window as if hoping the subject of his ire would feel it from wherever they were. Somewhere off in the forest someone sneezed loudly. **“No matter, for now. Please relax. I will only keep you company for a short time, as I’ll be heading off myself soon.”**

“You’re leaving?” Ethan asked, confused.

“Yes. I wasn’t granted a lot of time away to do my work, so I’ll go back for a few days and return after that.”

“I see.” Ethan took another sip of his drink, that warmth was calming. He slumped a little in his chair, the tension disappearing a little at a time.

"We can postpone our little chat until a friend of yours is available to sit in the room with you for comfort"

Ethan blinked twice; he wasn't going to do it now? **"that's...really considerate of you."** He said quietly, his concerns had been consistently challenged in a good way. **"I... think I'd be okay. You aren't...as scary as I thought."** His face reddened, the realisation he said the last part out loud. To his surprise Brom gave him a gentle smile that reached his eyes.

"I apologise for not saying your name. I've heard you don't care for titles, but inside the law I cannot grant your request." The man looked at Ethan directly. **"However. While it is just the two of us, granted we keep it quiet. Then I can make an exception."**

The room felt lighter, Ethan's eyes wide, he could barely contain his smile, almost jumping out of his seat, hands pressed to the table. **"Really?"** he asked. Brom's surprise was well hidden, he refused to break his professional stance but the air around him was beaming after a time. **"Of course. So long as you don't mind."**

"I don't mind at all! It-" he caught himself, the pain in his side hitting harder now that he'd moved abruptly. He winced, returning to his previous position. Despite it, his excitement remained. A quiet shuffle in his chair.

"I think it'd be better if you stayed seated. Ethan." Brom sipped his drink, using it as cover to hide a chuckle.

An elf called me by name. He subtly danced in his chair, rocking back and forth joyfully.

"Now, while I don't have long before the group returns. We can talk a little about how I can help you. Forgive me, as I know we've been introduced over the crystal, but this is how I do things." He bowed his head, hand resting over his chest, while the other sat behind him. **"My name is Brom Belesprit. I work for Kaizen and his family under the orders of the council. In saying that, as part of the extended family, I would like to provide you with my assistance."**

Chapter 10

The council. A chill ran down his spine. But his friends had vouched for him, so far, he'd gone out of his way to be overly kind. Unless it was a ploy? It wasn't the first time he'd been duped. **"What kind of assistance?"** he asked.

"I know vaguely what you'd be returning to. With that in mind, I know you've expressed wishes on changing your living situation. I can't make your present situation a permanent change right now, but I can delay your return."

Ethan tapped his mug. **"So, you're telling me I'd still have to go back. Just...not now?"**

“Yes. The people who were looking for you aren’t aware of your location. The council, despite pressing me for updates, do not know either.”

The shock hit him quickly, he had knights looking for him. Just saying his name was dangerous, touching him wasn’t allowed either outside of a family member. If this man was found out- **“.... Isn’t that dangerous for you?”**

Brom flinched, but corrected himself swiftly. **“I will handle it. Outside of that, I wanted to ask you if there is a way I can help with a more permanent change down the road. With your abilities having improved vastly over the past year, it is entirely possible to get some level of public-”**

“That isn’t an option.” The thought was nice, Ethan was content with this, he knew there was no changing anything. **“I’m a reaper.”**

The air became dense, Brom’s professionalism faltered, the shock obvious. He couldn’t hide it. His head tilted forward, eyes hidden by the reflection on his glasses. This conversation was over. He took another sip of his drink, this was fine. **“No.”** Brom’s voice broke Ethan’s thoughts, his calm tone gone. Replaced by something he’d yet to place. The man’s fists were clenched, lip trembling. **“That is unacceptable!”** Voice loud, angry. He abruptly stood from his chair, pacing. Ethan returned his view to the drink; he should’ve said it earlier. Maybe then he wouldn’t have been strung along. His eyes closed, this was how things were supposed to be. The squeak of the polished dress shoes had a consistent pace, four steps in each direction. The noise so easy to focus on, he could hear vague mumbling, nothing coherent. The pattern of the steps changed, the four steps to the left became five, six, seven. They stopped.

“Ethan.”

He felt oddly calm; this had happened so many times before. He’d never hear from them again. That fact made it hard to want to open his eyes, to look their way. But they’d called his name, he couldn’t ignore it. Guardedly, he glanced in their direction. The shock shifted, Ethan’s eyes wide. Brom pulled a chair close, sitting in such a way that they were a similar height. The look on his face was reminiscent of pity, but kinder. Ethan didn’t know how to place it, but it tugged at his heart. The man reached for his hand, cautiously at first but his grip was firm. **“I will make sure you go back to something better. I swear it.”**

Ethan could feel that strain again, he didn’t want to cry, not again. He pushed it back, a tense smile on, the tears still in the corner of each eye. Brom hadn’t left. **“Even if-”** He struggled to say it, a tear falling down anyway. **“Even if I don’t last long enough to enjoy it?”** he sniffled. Brom’s grip tightened. They sat in silence for a time, enough for Ethan to grasp his own emotions. **“I appreciate the gesture. But you don’t have to go out of your way for me. It won’t end well for you”**

Brom let go of Ethan’s hand, he took off his glasses, holding them in one hand while dabbing his eyes. He let out a sigh, all professionalism had been pulled from him. Ethan didn’t understand how he was still there, wanting to help. Brom cleared his throat, his glasses placed back where they were supposed to be, he straightened himself. **“I have a daughter.”** He said quietly. He reached for his pocket, taking out a brown leather pouch, beautifully embroidered with a gold edge. Despite its size, it was incredibly thick. As he opened it, photos threatened to explode from the seams, every one of them of two people, a small girl varied in age from a baby to around four years old, while the other was a beautiful elven woman with short hair. Both of them smiling in every image, Brom wasn’t in many, but the few that contained all three were heart-warming.

He handed one particular one to Ethan, the small girl, wearing a bright purple dress, her hair in tiny twin tails, big green eyes just like her father's. **"Her name is Hime."** He spoke with pride, it caused an ache in the back of Ethan's chest, another family that showed a part of life he'd never get. Jealousy was forever lingering while he looked at the smile on this kid's face.

"She looks so happy." Ethan whispered.

"She is. I'd give everything I have to see her smile." Brom responded. **"I hope to do the same for you."**

".... Why? You don't even know me."

"Because if Hime was in your situation, I'd be begging someone to do the same."

Ethan shook his head, his grip on the mug now tight. Why was everyone going out of their way for him? It felt like too much, it was unbelievable, despite how much he wanted it to all be true, none of it made any sense. **"But then you're putting them at risk too."**

"Kaizen and I have things in place for them, and for myself. We will be okay."

Another answer, how much of this had been thought out before he even got here? Why wasn't everything as expected? People were going out of their way for him, his father was here, they kept his feelings in mind whenever they came his way. It was...weird. Too much, a dream that he didn't feel he could keep. He was going to become a liability to these lovely people just by being here. **"It doesn't make sense."** he muttered. **"The moment he finds out, you'll be taken away too!"** Tone so much angrier than he wanted. His fingers continued to tense, the hold on the mug so strong it cracked, hot liquid spilt everywhere, blood mixed in as flesh cut on sharp ceramic.

Brom's panic was immediate, Ethan barely felt anything as he stared at the aftermath. He could hear the man talk, reassure him while cleaning new wounds. The tips of each finger red, stinging, a few cuts though not deep. He found himself numbing, he wanted to go back to his room, the quiet no longer felt like a problem. Better to get used to it now.

The next few minutes were a blur, Ethan returned to his room, fingers bandaged, Brom diligently trying his best to communicate, but the boy had shut down, staring at his hands while they remained in his lap. His legs covered by sheets, mind begging for quiet, while simultaneously screaming for Brom to stay. He could hear the others return, loudly a conversation started outside his door, just quiet enough that he couldn't understand what they were saying. This was normal, that old normal he'd dreaded. The room felt like it was so much bigger, the walls extended out creating a wide empty room. Nothing to fill the space, only the bed, it too felt larger, expensive, yet so much colder.

He glimpsed the door, that blue settled among white walls, wooden but not cut, it was like a tree was shaped to fit the means, so beautifully entwined around that crystalized door. Words spoken just out of earshot, sharp, judgemental. He turned to the windows, blocked, that once open gateway to freedom, covered in branches like a cage. Time was endless, food slipped through the door twice a day, no words exchanged, he'd just sit. Wait.

His eyes glazed over, head down, body listless. The quiet was torture, his mind so set in this one room, he'd not noticed people open the door, walk in, try to communicate. They weren't in *this* room.

“He still won’t say anything?”

Brom shook his head, fingers on the bridge of his nose, stress high. **“No. He shut down mid conversation. I’m at a loss, but I can’t stay much longer.”**

Kaizen took another peek, Ethan looked like a doll, barely moving, a vacant stare that went nowhere. **“We’ll do what we can. If anything changes, I’ll call you.”** Brom gave a brief nod, reluctantly leaving with his bags in tow. Tama checked Ethan over, each person in the house besides one tried to garner conversation. Ty tried to give him toys, no acknowledgement. He’d stopped eating, nothing they gave him seemed to get through. Gabranth had stayed in his own room, unwilling to leave as he didn’t want to make things worse.

The day came and went without change. Meals left untouched; he didn’t move. Kimiko’s violent outbreak at his lack of attention had been stopped by both her dads. A bruise on his face that now needed to heal, never stirred him. They had little choice but to leave him as night drew in. Tentatively everyone took their leave, Ethan remained upright, that vacant stare only seeing a room thrice the size of the one he was actually in. He’d not noticed his own hunger, his fatigue. The light of the moon cast a jailed shadow across him; another plate slid through the door. He could hear it, but every time he’d looked, nothing was there. This time was different, there it was. A small wooden bowl, filled with fruit, unchanged. His fingers twitched, body turned, he cautiously stepped out of the bed, bandaged hands cupping his meal as he returned to the only place to sit in the room.

He couldn’t see who delivered it, he didn’t know if the door was open. He picked up each piece with his fingers, eating slowly. The taste was the same, routine. When it was done, he returned it to the doorframe, placed atop a pile that’d been there for months. Everything as he’d left it. He shuffled back to his bed, laying down, the bed too large. His head hit the pillow, eyes closed. Tomorrow, the routine would start again.

“It’s empty” Kaizen stared at the ceramic plate on the floor, chipped as though it had been dropped from a short height. Kimiko and Tama were similarly stunned. **“What’d you put in it?”** Kaizen asked. **“Wasn’t me.”** Kimiko shrugged, **“Nor me darling.”**

“...Then who put this here?” His face contorted, finger on his chin, Tama looked in Gabranth’s direction, his door ajar.

“While you ask him, I’ll check on the patient. Don’t scare him.” Tama waved a finger at both of them while carefully making his way into Ethan’s room. The boy in the same position as yesterday, this time angled toward the window. The other two broke into Gabranth’s room, he sat on the bed, shirt on the floor, large bags under his eyes, bandage white, a clear sign it was healing. A book lay not far from him face down. He buckled his belt, taking a glance at the two. Kimiko’s gaze fixated on his chest, clearly defined muscles lined his torso, the right of his lower side, starting from the hip all the way to his abs were three thick and deep scars. Like the claws of a beast.

“DAAAMN-” A hand swiftly covered Kimiko’s mouth, stifling the enthusiasm as she stared this man up and down.

“Uh...hi?” he scooped up his shirt, eyebrow cocked. He hurriedly threw it on, trying to avoid her uncomfortable looks.

“Did you give Ethan food yesterday?” Kaizen asked. He watched the man finish dressing. He shook his head. **“Wait. So, I didn’t, you didn’t, neither did Tama. Brom ain’t here. Kiz wouldn’t. So that leaves.”**

“Yay!” Ty’s voice came from outside the door, plate in hand. **“He ate it! Woooo!”** He bounced, a celebration for one.

Kaizen and Kimiko sped back, nearly tackling the boy. The plate slipped from his hands, smashing in the distance. **“What’d you put on the plate!”** Both voices at once, hands on either side of him. He grinned, happier than before.

“Morning!”

“TY! WHAT’D YOU PUT ON THE PLATE!?” Kimiko’s patience had run out, both hands gripping the boy’s shirt while violently throwing him back and forth. This didn’t bother him in the slightest, happy to have his sister’s full attention.

“Fruit! Ethan ate elven fruit with me so I knew he’d like it.” He gleamed, full of pride. Kimiko’s grip relented, gravity pulled Ty to the floor. The race to the kitchen was immediate, the noise unparalleled. Any fruit they had thrown in a bowl, the subject of breakfast now an experiment. Tama had joined the trio upon finishing his examination, Ethan’s physical health was fine, wounds were healing, fingers back to normal, bruise faded. But his stare was vacant, whatever happened yesterday was lingering. Kaizen tried to give the plate to Ethan, he set it in his lap, it yielded no results. Kimiko loudly tried to feed him, which made a mess but he didn’t move. Tama merely asked Ty to do the same thing he did yesterday. He leaned down, placing it in the middle of the doorframe, pushing it forward a little.

Ethan glanced their way, it was small, slow, but he moved, one foot left the bed, then the other. Kimiko’s excitement was short-lived as she attempted to garner his attention. He only interacted with the food, picking it up, walking as though no one stood in his path, he then sat back on the bed, hunched forward, eating slowly. The air around him was incredibly lonely, he made no noise, he didn’t look anywhere else. He merely ate his food, stood, and tried to place his empty plate on an invisible stack, dropping it inches from the floor.

Both Kaizen and Tama stared in disbelief, that look, the action was more than familiar. They both glanced at Ty, the little goof happily swaying while holding the caught plate as though he’d accomplished a big feat. **“If this bastard is just ignoring us, I’m going to give him a piece of my mind”** Kimiko growled, pissed that her efforts yielded less than her *‘darling’* brother.

The day continued with similar attempts, nothing got through except for fruit. At least they could feed him, but that was all. As the afternoon snuck in, Kimiko sat on the end of Ethan’s bed, Kaizen against the wall. Tama continued his usual chores around the house. Ty happily sat waiting, staring. **“Is he fixed yet?”** he asked.

“No. I don’t know why he’s broken.” Kaizen’s arm tensed, folded across his chest.

“Oh. That makes it hard.”

“Yeah. He’s never done this before.”

Kimiko frowned **“He kind of has. Back when we first met, he’d just kinda zone out sometimes while at Zene’s place.”** They both glanced the boy’s way. His vacant stare was uncomfortable, he blinked only because he had too.

As everyone remained in the room next to him, Gabranth eventually poked his head out the door. He could hear the conversation going on, though sometimes it was a little harder to understand. He peered into the room everyone else was in, cautious. Somehow his steps got the attention of one, Ethan. His eyes widened, the first change in expression for the past day. Mouth agape, as though he’d seen him for the first time in forever. As he blinked, the vibrancy returned, he glimpsed the room, confused. **“...what’s going on?”**

“ETHAN!” Kimiko flung herself on top of him, a hug so tight he winced. Her comfort swiftly turned to violence as she began pulling his hair. **“Why did you ignore me?”** she growled, all the while Kaizen attempted to pull her off.

“Kimiko! Stop it.” He held her legs off the floor, kicking and growling like a feral animal.

“Hi!” Ty’s arms leaned against the bed.

“Um...did I miss something?” His fist clenched the blanket. Breath shortening, visibly nervous. Gabranth had left his view, he questioned himself if he had been there.

“Woah there, it’s okay.” Kaizen’s hand grazed his back, gentle, kind. Ethan hunched forward. What was he doing before this? He couldn’t remember. He remembered feeling so empty.

“Are you fixed now?” Ty asked, leaning close enough to be in Ethan’s view.

“Fixed?” he asked.

“You were ignoring everyone.” Kimiko grumpily returned to her place on the bed, clearly upset though holding herself back.

Ethan shook his head, what were they talking about? He was...with Brom? He blinked twice; he could remember a sting on his fingers. They were talking about something, somehow, he’d blocked it out. **“I-”** He winced, thoughts spiralling in mass as the day’s events tumbled all at once, impossible to decipher. *Push it aside.*

Ty’s arms outstretched, pulling his upper body up higher. **“Do you want to play? I have my toys.”** He exclaimed, eyes bright, expectant. Ethan returned a brief smile before politely shaking his head. He uncomfortably sat in the middle of their comforting words, two of them clearly going out of their way for him, while the other acted more like herself. He preferred it.

“Do you want something to drink?” Kaizen’s query added to that feeling. His heart sank; he was drinking tea. Parts of their conversation coming back in a more coherent form. Both Brom and Kaizen were putting themselves at risk for his wellbeing, by proxy everyone else was also in danger.

He lowered his head, that vacant stare all consuming. The sheets, his only visual, Ty’s arms would flicker into view as he shifted about, the boy barely able to sit still for a minute. **“You, okay?”** Kaizen and Ty’s

voices rang at the same time. He nodded faintly; it wasn't him he was worried about. He didn't want to lose this, but he also didn't want them to suffer. He could run? But they'd find him, even if they didn't, he couldn't move like he wanted, it was likely that someone from 'home' would find him first. He couldn't stay, or leave. If he gave himself up, they'd have a chance, he could feign ignorance and they'd never know... but then he'd be in that room.

The walls began to shift, large extending branches wrapping around cream paint. The air grew cold, stagnant, light dimmed, that beautiful ambience of the forest faded to an eerie silence. That room, anytime his thoughts spiralled he'd be here. He could feel everything numbing, that panic that consumed his being was now a mere apathy. He'd merely be here, existing until he didn't anymore. Without anyone ever seeing him- A hand touched his shoulder; the room vanished in an instant. He raised his head, shocked to start with, then the nervousness settled in. He turned slowly, spotting Kaizen's smile. Ty wasn't far off, Kimiko stood by the door. All three of them staring in his direction. **"Tama said you're healing alright, how about a change of scenery?"**

The forest flooded the senses, sweet scents of nearby wildflowers carried by a gentle and subtle breeze, beautifully combating the warmth of the sun to create a perfect harmony. Birds sang in the nearby trees, the grass, thick, barely cut was soft between Ethan's fingers as he sat in the centre of it. The tension was ripped from him the moment he felt the ground against his feet. He lay back, eyes closed, breaths deep, he didn't notice as three others lingered nearby. Conversation started among them, hidden from him willingly as he preferred to enjoy the moment outside the walls. A smile sat so openly on his face that it caught Ty's attention. **"Do you feel better?"** He asked.

"Mm." Ethan could almost fall asleep here, but he knew someone would drag him back inside, so he opted to stare at the blue sky.

"What was up with the fruit?" Kimiko plopped down on his other side, legs crossed, head in one hand while her elbow rested on her knee. **"If you wanted some you could've asked instead of being weird about it"** she scoffed.

Fruit? **"What are you talking about?"** Ethan sat himself up, he winced, the scrunch of his upper body causing strain on his side.

"It's all you ate" Kaizen interjected. Ethan's stomach dropped, memories of that room flashed by, his hands rose up, gripping his hair as he pulled forward, knees up. That judgemental voice, it lingered even outside the room, the pile of bowls, the emptiness. His breath caught, even the outdoors was suffocating. A looming confinement that pushed in from every side. He violently shook his head, catching his friends off guard. He wanted to snap out of it, but it kept drawing him back in.

"What's with you lately?" Kimiko's words cut through the panic, again he couldn't do anything on his own, he needed their help, but it was also causing this mess.

He couldn't say it. His arms fell to the ground, legs slowly outstretched as he sat there. **"...nothing."**

"Could've fooled me" Kimiko scoffed, her finger flicked his forehead. **"You're a mess."**

"Kimiko, maybe you-"

“Shut it!” Her tone harsher than normal, Kaizen flinched as she growled at him. **“Out with it.”**

Ethan’s hands gripped his arms, foot bouncing, shoulders blue as a steam came off. He couldn’t say it; they’d be in even more trouble. **“I...”** he flinched, how else could he put it? He couldn’t talk about his homelife, it was forbidden, but they were already breaking so many rules. His head hurt, there was too much going on at once. He didn’t want to lose them, he didn’t want to go home, he didn’t want- **“I don’t want to lose you guys.”** His grip tightened.

Kimiko’s expression dropped, as did Kaizen’s. **“We can’t get lost, we’re at home.”** Ty leaned backward, finger to his chin.

“You won’t lose anything-” Kaizen started

“I will. The longer I’m here, the more you do for me. The moment he finds out.” Ethan’s grip tensed more, his hands shaking, knuckles white. **“I don’t know what to do.”**

“Pfft, no one can force me to do anything. I don’t care if they’re high elves or whatever” Kimiko scoffed, hand waving in the air dismissively. **“We’ve gone through worse right? We’ll be fine.”**

Ethan could feel the panic at the mention of his position, she knew. Another person was in the loop without his input. His shoulders glowed brighter, the steam growing intensely. **“...I can’t”** he started, breath caught, he struggled to think, to move, his foot rocked back and forward so violently his whole leg was shaking. His hand moved from his arm to his chest, that suffocating pain drenched in the frustration of how little power he had. **“...lose everything again.”** His skin felt tight, like something was trying to escape in one big burst, he struggled to maintain some semblance of control. He could hear Kimiko and Kaizen speak, they were panicking too, he couldn’t make out words anymore. Everything was hot, painful, exhausting, it felt like his joints were being compressed under the skin, an invisible pressure squeezing his limbs with a fury. His father’s image came to mind, moments of him holding his hand when he had this issue as a child. **“Dad”** he sniffled as everything went dark.

The day drifted by quietly, everyone unwilling to speak in fear they’d say something wrong, or make the situation worse. Kaizen spent time in his office, keeping Brom up to date, apologising about not informing him about Ethan’s condition earlier, Kimiko stayed in Ethan’s room. Ty played outside at Tama’s request while he continued to keep the house put together. Another figure wandered the hall, hair a pale blue, stitches along parts of their joints, Ty dragged them off with enthusiasm. Ethan slept for a while, his fever took hours to resolve, anxiety lingered. He returned to a strange state of being present but not. He’d notice people walk in, talk, but when left on his own it was as though he was in a cage, his eyes glazed over.

As the day continued Kaizen tiredly wandered into Gabranth’s room, he peered in first. Gabranth wasn’t on the bed, nor standing nearby. Yet the room contained some strange noises. He glanced down, there he was, doing push ups at an alarming speed. He didn’t look up, seemingly focused on his own task as if trying to think about nothing else. **“Gabranth?”** Kaizen asked nervously.

The man looked up, swiftly standing, his cheeks red. **“Uh”** he rubbed the back of his head. **“Sorry. I didn’t hear you.”** He mumbled.

“Nah it’s fine. I wanted to ask a favour.”

“Oh. Sure.” Kaizen’s hands gripped either side of him, he pushed him out the door. **“W-wait what-”**

“Thanks buddy!” Kaizen cheerily dragged him through the hall, past Kimiko and Tama who stood outside an open door, without another word he threw him into Ethan’s room, slamming the door behind him.

The man stood in shock, staring at the boy who was presently looking out the window, he glanced his way before returning his view to the forest outside. Gabranth felt his body go cold, what was he supposed to do? To say? He opened his mouth; he had to explain himself. **“Uh. I’m uh... Sorry Kaizen insisted I come in here.”** He felt his heart in his throat as the boy barely acknowledged him **“Um. I’ll go.”**

“Its fine. More than likely there’s three people pressed up against the door.”

“Aye!” “Shhh!” The door rattled, the sound of footsteps swiftly attempting to reposition themselves.

“Thought so.”

Gabranth shuffled, awkwardly standing without purpose. **“I’m sorry, I wasn’t going to come back in here after last time.”**

“You might as well take a seat; I won’t punch you this time.” After a short silence the man obliged, he tentatively walked across the room, sitting at the edge of the bed. His head lowered, hands resting in front of him, arms on his legs. Ethan didn’t move, watching the clouds above the trees. The two waited for the other to speak. The lack of noise created a thick air. Ethan broke first, his legs moving upward a little, foot bouncing. **“This is just making it worse.”**

“I’m so sorry. I’m terrible at conversation.” Gabranth’s fingers interwove.

“Stop apologising already, there’s other words you can use to describe how you feel.”

“You’re right, I’m sor- “Ethan’s glare caused a flinch. He leaned forward to create further distance between them. **“Right... uh. So how are your wounds?”**

The boy looked down, eyes grazed his side. **“They’re doing okay. Apparently, I’ll be back on my feet in no time.”**

“That’s a relief.”

“How about you? They said you got poisoned with that cut on your arm.”

Gabranth glanced at the bandage, he seemed almost surprised by it, a forgotten wound. **“Oh yeah. To be quite frank it isn’t much of an issue. It still works like normal.”**

“It’s not painful? It looks like it’s healed less than mine has.” Ethan carried a quizzical expression, curious as he looked the bandaged arm over, spots of red lingered in parts.

“Hm. How do I put it? I guess with my kind of work...pain just, fades... after time. The initial shock is the worst, after that” he glanced down to his hands, **“You feel nothing.”** Gabranth said nothing else, he merely sat quietly, hands limp while he waited for a response.

Ethan was unsure what to say, he stared at his own wounds, the pain he'd gone through, the pain he felt by moving. The pain in his chest. The longer the silence continued the harder it was to say something, eventually Ethan broke the silence yet again. **"That's unfair. How the hell am I supposed to do that?"**

"It'd be better if you didn't become like me."

"I...guess not." The two fell quiet, both heads down, anything else in the room a relief from the awkwardness of their conversational partner. Gabranth could hear Ethan's breathing, he could smell antiseptic, the odd rustle of the sheets as Ethan's leg bounced. A trait he'd inherited from him as he began doing the same.

As the quiet dragged on, the door thumped loudly **"For fucks sake."** Kimiko's shrill tone echoed through the room. **"SHHH" "JUST HUG AND MAKE UP ALREADY!! STOP BEING SO DAMN AWKWARD!! THE BOTH OF YOU!!!"** **"Kimiko! SHHH. They're trying to talk."** **"Well, they suck at it. Tell each other how you feel already, or I will come in there and PUNCH YOU BOTH!!"**

Ethan glared at the door, annoyed. **"Damn busybody."** He sighed, the tension relented some, his leg stilled. **"She's right, annoying as that is. I just... don't really know what to say."** He looked at his hands. **"I looked for you, for such a long time, but now that you're here."** His fists clenched **"I'm angry. That isn't just ... going to go away."**

"I know." Gabranth's back all Ethan could see at this point. **"I. I want..."** He felt frustrated, a burning fury in his own chest as he couldn't articulate his thoughts. **"Ugh, I can't find the words."** He attempted to relax, though struggled. **"I'm not great at being a parent, I don't know what I'm supposed to be doing. I just want; I want to be a part of your life. I want to but I'm terrified."**

"Parenthood is scary huh?" Ethan asked, his father chuckled, the first time he'd done so in his presence. Ethan stared for a moment, watching a smile he wasn't sure he'd seen.

"A little bit. But that's not what I meant"

"What did you mean then?"

The room felt larger, the space between them ever growing. Gabranth not once looked up from his hands, Ethan watched him patiently, though as time passed, he began to fidget. **"I'm... not ready to talk about that yet. "**

"OH, COME ON!!!" Kimiko's fists hit the other side of the door with one loud thud.

Ethan had flinched, Gabranth startled, both staring at the wooden panels with a level of worry. **"KIMIKO SHUT UP DAMN IT!!"** Ethan yelled back, followed by a long sigh, fingers raised to his forehead, the tension created a headache, but he understood her complaints. **".... Okay. I won't push anything."** He started, hand returning to his lap, shoulders relaxed. **"But for now, you'll come say hi from time to time?"**

Gabranth's eyes widened. **"Y-you want me to?"**

"Mm. I think Mom would want us to at least try. So, I think, it'd be nice to at least do that."

"Thanks kiddo." The two shared a smile, Gabranth wiped a small tear from the corner of one eye, words unable to explain his glee. They sat in silence again, Ethan leaned a little closer, his shoulder resting against Gabranth's back. **"...Um. What do I call you? I...don't really"**

The man sat in silence a moment longer, afraid to move. **"W-whatever you want. My friends- Uh. People typically called me Gab."**

"...Feels a bit weird calling you by name."

"I can't imagine calling my dad by his name either." Gabranth chuckled, he attempted to look over his shoulder, Ethan had his head down, relaxed, comfortable. His eyes had been closed until the word dad was mentioned.

"Your dad?"

"Did I not mention him before?"

"....Uh. Maybe? I don't really remember much."

Gabranth shrunk in place. **"Oh... right. You were really small."** His tone full of regret, he played with his fingers, foot tapping lightly on the floor. The movement stirred the boy, causing him to sit upright., Gabranth stood. **"Sorry. I'll be right back."** He jumped off the bed, swiftly pulling the door open. He dodged the two bodies tucked up against it before heading into the room next door.

Kaizen and Kimiko lay on the bedroom floor, both groaning as one lay atop the other. **"Well, that was a bust."** Kimiko scoffed, she pushed herself up, one hand squashing Kaizen's face into the floorboards. Before Kaizen could respond, Gabranth had returned, politely stepping around them. Book in hand. An apologetic look on his face. Tama took the initiative, he stepped back, the two on the floor dragged along with him as the door closed quietly behind them. One could hear complaints echo through the hall as they were pulled away, Kimiko was the loudest, her protest drenched in fury.

As Gabranth neared the bed, Ethan's eyes widened. He recognised the book immediately, he held his hands out instinctively, the excitement hard to contain as this battered and torn leather-bound tome sat firmly in his fingers. **"I thought I'd never see this again."** His hand rubbed across the cover, it was bent in places, clearly something large had trampled it at some point in time, but he didn't care. **"Where'd you find this?"** He asked. Gabranth awkwardly sat back down, **"Your friend gave it to me."** He said quietly.

"...She should've just given it back to me earlier." He grumbled, while flipping the book open. The pages were the same, bent but otherwise fine. The loose paper was oddly nostalgic, it felt soft between his fingers, a welcomed comfort he'd sought for weeks. As he turned the page, he paused. **"...I guess you read it huh?"** his tone quiet, down.

Gabranth played with his fingers, nervous. **"No. I saw the first page and didn't want to go any further."**

Ethan's eyes widened, the entire time he owned this book everyone he knew basically perused it as they pleased. Kimiko and Kaizen both had doodles in it, it was rare that someone actually valued his privacy. **"Oh."** Gabranth rummaged through his pocket, taking out a faded and torn photo. **"This fell out... I... didn't know you knew him"**

Ethan gently took hold of it, he cradled it in his hands, his smile soft. **"Thanks."** He whispered, pulling the image close to his chest. **"I used to go to his shop; he'd let me watch him work."** Ethan stared at it, head low. The photo was returned to his book so carefully, hidden among the many sketches as he flipped through it swiftly. He stopped on a page with sketches of the older man hit by a wave of wistfulness. **"Then he twigged that you were my-"** he paused, that awkward air returned. **"He talked about you a lot. Shared stories about what you were like."**

Gabranth flinched, his anxiety visible. **"You were in Lumire?"** Gabranth asked.

"No, he came to live near home for a while. I'd sneak out, just kinda sit in his shop for a while." Ethan ran his fingers across the sketch, smiling as thoughts came to mind of this grumpy old man. His gruff tone, swear words hidden in every sentence, the red cap he wore everywhere. **"I miss him"**

Gabranth frowned. He did too, but he didn't know if he wanted to admit that. His predicament was his own fault; nothing was going to change that. **"H-how... long have you known him?"** His words came out rough, awkward.

"I met Laz when I was little. Then he-" Ethan stopped, his expression dropped. **"...he left a few years later."** He flipped the page, more sketches, he closed it, expression soured.

"...I'm sorry"

"I don't want your apology." Ethan let out a sigh. He wanted to continue spending time with his father, but it was exhausting. He knew nothing about him, the real him, and the same held true to the other party. **"Thank you for returning this."** He gripped his journal, clutching it close to his chest as he pulled his knees up. **"If it's okay with you, I think I'd like a little bit of time by myself."**

"Oh, yeah. Right. I'll just- yeah." Gabranth stood up, stepping backward until he bumped into the door. Fumbling for the doorknob. As he closed it behind him Ethan chuckled faintly. He was not what he expected, the hurt hadn't left, it still pained him that things were the way they were, but it gave him comfort to know it was a little better. With time there was a chance they'd get to know each other, but he was too panicky to ask much.

Spindly tree like buildings stretched tall, reaching earnestly toward an eerily vibrant sky, cloudless, a strangely stale air lingered throughout. It merged with thick rocky walls; half faded into a sky upon meeting, as though one covered the other. Each structure contained stunningly nightlike tinted windows, sparkling without reflection. Smaller branches peered off to each house, creating pathways only accessible to those living within.

Those still attached to the ground grew sparse, like the flora along a forest floor, clearly overshadowed by those of higher status. Their buildings were fairly uniformed, beautiful, all styled similarly to the ones above, but the further to the ground one got, the shabbier and haphazard their designs became.

Along the cavern-like walls, effortlessly climbing into the blue abyss were white trees, they grew into the shapes of houses, each one hinting a beautifully vibrant colour of their own, blue, green, purple, gold, red. They held an air of importance, untouchable, beyond mortal reach. One building centred between them

all, sharing every colour, its roots reached all the way to the core of the city, a beacon of worship and glory.

Hidden above the rabble, climbing a naturally grown staircase was a particularly nervous individual, their sweater vest perfectly aligned, hair combed, posture impeccable. He glimpsed the world below, a mass of many cultures in one place, but more segregated the further one rose. He increased his pace, soon reaching a curved building in the centre of this glorious city he called home. He said nothing, head bowed as he stepped inside, the bickering of men an all but familiar sight. The room was tall, white, pristine. The splitting image of purity. A round table in the centre, curved around dull green leaves along the top of a branch. A few glowing fruits hung, untouched, they radiated a sense of godliness.

Intricate designs graced every surface, like the etching of a root through the ground. The floors felt like wood, polished yet oddly living. Brom made haste to his usual position, book in hand. One who was seated took notice of him as he stood off to the side, but they paid little mind as the conversation continued.

“He is becoming more of a hindrance than helpful. Nova is not even the most recent of the damage he has caused.” A deep voice rang through the air, a man steeped in green, white hair covered in thorns, a prickly robe clothed the majority of him, his chest bare. Attire proudly showing off a grasshopper symbol under a gate, nestled among a fading tree.

“Yes, but he has kept this place in check longer than all of your men combined. Removing him from the equation before the coming of Losar is a fool’s errand.” One showcased in purple shook his head, a clear annoyance as though this topic had been weighing on their last nerve.

“Tch, he deserves some form of punishment for his constant recklessness at our expense. Even the elder would agree.”

A few nodded, the first sign of agreement for the day. **“Wisp. You have been strangely quiet.”** The particularly disagreeable man clasped his hands, smirk on his face. **“Are you perhaps sore after that thing slipped through your fingers yet again?”** the man teased. He stared at a man across him in a royal blue robe, elegant, white hair tied part way with a bun, yet still reaching below his knees. Small blue flowers nestled among the strands. His figure tall, one could easily mistake them for someone in their forties, but they gave off the air of someone much older, wiser. His robe was modest, flowing like water. Despite the slight, the man seemed unphased.

“I was merely waiting for you to finish your usual complaints. You always have so many Cirdyl. It seems your age is starting to wear on your mind if such trivial matters consistently get in the way of the big picture.” He raised his head slightly. **“And as far as I was aware, one of your own, failed to capture that ‘thing’ as you called him. What a sad predicament that you had valuable information and failed to act on it appropriately.”** He clasped his hands. **“Ah, my sincerest apologies. You would not have known the struggle we were facing as you are not privy to Wisp family matters. Perhaps that is why things are kept within certain walls and not open to all.”**

The man opposite him visibly cringed, the snickers around the table adding to the visible vein on his forehead. **“This room isn’t for bickering. But perhaps we can come to an agreement.”** The man in purple, a spindle of thread hanging from every frayed edge of cloth, adorned with spider-like imagery glimpsed the shorter elf in the room, head still bowed. **“Belesprit.”**

“Yes, your grace?”

“Have the dragon locate and bring Castien’s *folly* back.”

Brom felt his heart stop, he did not budge, waiting as another would speak up. The man who made the declaration glanced around the room, waiting for some kind of argument, there was none. Brom felt the need to speak, but doing so would put his own head on the chopping block. As his voice was caught, another finally spoke up, their body slim, feminine, but carried masculine facial features. They were dressed in red; they only shared aspects of white like their companions, revelling in the showy nature that was an impressive, eye-catching colour. A beetle nestled under a birch tree imprinted on the belt around their waist. Their words were cut off, as Brom’s mind began screaming from within, while outwardly showing no signs of panic.

The conversation ended shortly after, Brom waited for the men to take their leave, a harsh reality now weighing on his shoulders as their plans were given a deadline. Cirdyl walked by him, he followed, that knowing look was all the confirmation he required. They strolled along a long white bridge, hints of green etched into the path, leading back to a beautifully designed house of living wood. The man’s attitude had soured, more than before, his attendants were few, all cowering behind Brom who stood just behind the man. **“No word?”** he asked, not looking back.

“No. We’ve yet to locate him.” Brom’s response was immediate, a lie, his whole body tensed, but outwardly no one could see it.

“Tch. Inform me if it changes.” He snapped. **“If Wisp gets his hands on him first, he will hide him.”**

“Yes. Of course.”

“Belesprit” The man halted, Brom paused, cautious as to not make eye contact. **“I expected more from you. Do not disappoint me again.”**

As the party continued on their way, Brom was able to slip back, the exhaustion from a mere moment with these men was more than he wanted to admit. He made his way to the upper part of the city, below the white houses, he carried himself across the linked pathways until he came to a separated building, closer to the ground but still immaculately designed. It was beautifully decorated with night themed windows, with a few varied designs in places. He pushed open a hand-crafted door, aspects of green strewn throughout, with a strange pink sparkle in its centre, almost out of place. The moment the door pulled closed, tiny tapping echoed through the cozy hall. It increased in speed, the shimmer of pink and purple, bubbles, a strange twinkling sound matching each step. **“PAPA!”** Two tiny arms outstretched, pigtails on either side, a dress clearly designed for a princess of magical origins, overpowered the rest of her cute features.

His stress melted. Book fell to the floor, a large smile graced his face, vocal pitch heightened. **“HIMMEEEE!”** He scooped her up in both arms, hugging her tightly as though he hadn’t seen her in years. They spun in the hallway, her giggling like bottled joy. He rubbed his nose against hers, clearly, she tired of it before he did, she put a hand to his face.

“Papa stoop” she complained, the odd giggle escaping. He complied, setting her down as she waved a small wand about, bubbles filling their tiny hallway. **“Papa look! It’s all sparkles!”** she spun around on her own, her dress flaring outward.

“Only my little princess could look this adorable. Where is your mother? I have to pay respects to the Queen of the castle.”

“Mama is in the kishen!” Her tiny hand grasped his, wrapping around two fingers as she happily pulled him along. The house was modest, everything had a place, pictures lined the walls, collectables from trips, gifts for his family and other small sentimental items lined their shelves. The hall led to a few rooms, each one brimming with the personality of the person who owned it. Hime’s room was covered in pink, purple, sparkly items, toys and teddies littered the bed and floor. Posters covered her walls, a common theme of magical girls occupying every instance of her space.

The living room held an array of plants, books and pink, a culmination of the three people who live within it. Despite the mass of toys, things were kept in an orderly fashion, a home that felt lived in.

The sounds of the kitchen came through before they reached it, freshly baked goods carrying a floral accent. Brom could feel the weight of his feet lighten, he glided into the room, pulled by his four-year-old daughter, as she loudly proclaimed how lovely her day was, that she vanquished the dreaded grumples from their house. The vision of a beautiful woman graced his sight next, hair cut short, white, her eyes a lighter green, cheeks rosey, she had a long face, tall, slender, she towered over Brom. **“Welcome back.”** Her voice was warm, soothing, he melted hearing it. He closed the distance between them; she barely had enough time to put the fruits of her baking safely on the counter before he’d intertwined his fingers with hers.

“Iris...I missed you.” He kissed the back of her hand, she shook her head lightly, a smile escaped.

“As did I. Will you be staying long?” she asked, one hand still attached to him while she began cleaning the mess that remained.

“A few days, maybe a week. Then I want to bring you to Kaizen’s for a while.”

“UNCLE KAI!” Hime’s voice was shrill, deafening. She threw her own celebration on the kitchen floor as her parents watched.

“I’m sorry.” Brom said softly.

“We don’t apologise unless we’ve done something wrong. It isn’t the Belesprit way. Don’t back down on this Brom.” She leaned against the counter, her smile reassuring.

“Mm. I have some ground work to lay down. The next few days are going to be...difficult.”

The length of the day felt twice as long, his workload never ending as he retreated to his office, a dark wooden desk adorned with crystal. One large leather chair settled behind it, and papers reached high toward the ceiling. They’d only grown since his departure. He was barely visible as he sat behind the stacks, his daughter made herself a tiny spot on the floor to doodle while pretending to think about hard work as if copying her father. A pink teddy bear wearing a green tie at her side with a notepad loosely held in both its stuffy paws. She coloured her paper with thick colourful crayons, happily chirping away.

Brom enjoyed the company, he diligently flew through the work on his desk, the promise of a small tea party with his two girls a fitting motivation to finish early. As he stacked yet another pile of completed papers to his right, a familiar voice echoed from his pocket.

“Sooooooo....” Kaizen was unmistakable, irritating, it took no time at all for Brom to understand he was already over his head with the little work he'd left behind for him to complete. Hime jumped up, long ears perked in Brom's direction as she noticed her fun uncle's voice.

“What is it?” Brom grumbled. The voice tensed on the other end, cautious as the elf could hear pacing. **“What're you stuck on?”** he relented.

“All the paperwork-”

“Sign it. ALL of it, and leave it in a pile for when I come pick it up.” He was blunt, but kept his annoyance in check as Hime's tiny frame peered over his desk. She waved at the crystal in his hand as if Kaizen could see her.

“Oh, just sign?”

“Yes. I did everything else.”

“Hi uncle Kai!” Hime waved both arms, jumping up and down from across the desk.

“Hey princess!”

She giggled, happy to be acknowledged. **“I am doing ex...pens sis.”** She proudly exclaimed; hands nestled on her hips.

“Oooh! What a smart cookie you are.”

Brom smiled briefly before lightly petting his daughter on the head. **“I have a few things to talk with you about when I get back.”** He said quietly. **“Until then can you please make sure your guest is comfortable?”**

“Oh. Sure thing. He's doing better by the way.” Kaizen glimpsed around the corner of his office door, spotting Ethan wandering through the hall as he once again headed off to another part of the house, led by Ty.

“...I'm pleased to hear that.” His voice quiet.

“He'll be okay. I'll keep you up to date on stuff.”

“Thank you.”

Kaizen grinned, he took this moment to end the call, knowing if he pushed his luck Brom would not be lenient the moment his daughter left the room. He turned around, glaring at the pile on his desk. It was lesser than when Brom had been here, but the little there was draining his energy. His shoulders slumped, he flopped into his chair, bored, he lay his head down, eyeing the paper that now seemingly towered overhead. He knew his fate if he didn't get it done, but that did nothing for his motivation. Perhaps he could enjoy the next few days knowing they'd be his last, and he'd take his death with pride the day Brom came back.

As he pondered his demise, a pair of chuckles came from nearby. He sat himself up, curiously peering out the only window in his office. Ty ran around like the mad man he was, yelling loudly as only he knew how.

Following him with a blindfold on, was Ethan, Kimiko taunted him nearby as he tried to catch the other two. They'd somehow coaxed him into playing with them both. The slower pace of the game made it easy enough for him to join in, and the two wary of his condition made sure to keep him away from dangerous obstacles. Though Kimiko toed the line. Unable to contain his own boredom Kaizen threw the window open, scrambling out the frame and onto the grass below.

His joy was short-lived as his body lifted off the ground, returning inside without his say so. Tama stood behind him, staring the man down with one brow raised. **"Brom said you had work. You can play later darling."** He pointed toward the paperwork, Kaizen's demeanour dropped. An ungodly groan escaped him as he painstakingly pulled himself back into his chair, pen in hand. He could feel the exhaustion drench him like a heavy blanket as he began scribbling his name on the first piece of paper, listening to the kids playing outside.

As night approached Ethan stumbled inside, legs tired, mind ablaze with a sense of fun he hadn't had in ages. Ty had endless energy, as did Kimiko, one was still chasing the other as Ethan made his way into the living room. He paused as he spotted Gabranth resting at the edge of the couch. He was asleep, arms folded, his brow twitched from time to time, a visible sweat down the side of his face. It looked outwardly like someone taunted him. It caused him to tense periodically, a permanent discomfort. Ethan's fist clenched, that frustration from deep down lingered more than he wanted, he pulled himself away, hesitantly leaving the room, tiredly walking toward the kitchen as he could hear movement inside. He loitered at the door, watching as the anxiety of the past few days crept into the back of his mind. Tama scuttled around the room, everything well lit with a bright lamp, it felt almost like midday in there, something that piqued Ethan's curiosity. *How'd they find something like this? Was it man-made? Magic?* As he stepped further into the room, studying it with his whole mind, Tama glimpsed his way. **"I'm pleased to see you're getting around."** He said quietly, while cutting fresh vegetables.

"Oh. Y-yeah. Thank you for your continued care." Ethan bowed his head, nervous as he'd forgotten to say hello before getting lost in thought.

"You're welcome darling." He pushed a few of the ones he'd cut into a pot of water. Ethan drew closer, eyeing the ingredients.

"Did you want a hand?" he asked.

Despite no change in the man's expression, he seemed surprised. **"I mean... I don't mind making dinner, but if you want to help-"**

Ethan washed his hands, happily preparing the herbs left on the countertop. He stripped the leaves on a few, washed them, his fingers glowed blue as a small knife appeared between his thumb and index finger. He cut the remaining stems, removing anything that was too hard or thick. Everything was thrown into the pot. Tama watched him diligently, he'd completed his task long before Tama finished his own. So much so Ethan had pinched a few from his pile to help.

"You seem to know a lot about cooking." He said quietly.

Ethan peeled a few potatoes using his makeshift knife. **"Kimiko won't do it, and Kaizen can't, so I had to. It's fun though. I like making food. Makes me feel like I have a bit more control."** He paused, he

really did enjoy cooking, it was one of the few things that let him make all the decisions. What to eat, how it was prepared, how it was seasoned. All those decisions were chosen by him.

“I appreciate the help darling. It is nice to have someone to talk to.” Tama’s words knocked Ethan from his trance, he smiled, returning to his task as he helped get the rest of the items into the pot. Their stove was interesting, it had a form of gas that perpetually kept coming, he couldn’t tell the source, but he knew it was flammable. As if to showcase Ethan’s theory Tama lit a match, sending a flame forward to the metal plating above. Everything in their kitchen was new to him, he’d rarely been in a kitchen except when he stayed in a vampire’s mansion, but they never let him use it in fear he’d hurt himself. **“Hm, I hope the oven is still working.”** Tama lifted a large cut of meat onto the countertop, settled in a steel pan, battered and misshapen.

“What’s wrong with it?”

“It turns off randomly. Thankfully it didn’t do that when Brom was cooking, but sometimes it’ll shut off without warning.” Ethan could feel his heart ache, Brom had probably cooked the meal he gave him that night. Tama opened the oven door adjacent to the flame heating the stove. He flicked a dial and Ethan watched as the metal began warming from the inside. What he wouldn’t give to be able to pull it apart, but he knew nothing about it, so fixing it could prove tricky. As if answering some divine prayer, the heat subsided, and Tama lightly hit the side of the oven.

“Ah... I might have to ask Kaizen to barbecue it.” He groaned.

“Can I have a look at it?” Ethan asked.

“Sure. No harm done while I get this seasoned.”

As the heat died down, Ethan happily shoved his head in the oven, taking a closer look at the inner workings of the machine in question. It didn’t take him long to figure out what did what. There were runes all throughout this particular box, part of one part was covered by grout, he had no idea if it was the cause or not, but it couldn’t hurt. He cleaned it off, clambering back out to try it again. As the heat started back up, he watched Tama finish seasoning the large cut of meat. **“I think I got it.”**

“You’re a lifesaver. I’m surprised you got it working so fast.” Tama joyfully put it in, closing the door with his fingers crossed. The heat stayed on, leaving both boys absolutely chuffed.

“A friend taught me. He was really good with stuff like this.” Ethan began glancing around the room, curious. **“Do you have anything else that needs repair?”** he asked.

While the food was cooking, Ethan spent time seated at the table, a variety of strange objects scattered before him. Elated to have something to work on to pass time. He pulled things apart, grouping them into piles so he could study their mechanics, though most were run using magical means. A lot of runic symbols, keeping the interiors of these things quite simple. Ethan couldn’t help but think of better methods of preserving their function, if he could get different parts, he could upgrade this place in a way. He’d be here for a while, that gave him a bit of time to possibly change up how some of the more broken things worked.

By the time food was done and everyone went to bed, he took the remaining items to his room, happily working on the floor, pillows stuffed behind him. He’d forgotten his worries, stress, losing himself in a type of focus he hadn’t had in a long time. As he began fidgeting with a small cooling box, his eyes felt heavy,

he'd leaned further back, most of his weight against the pillows, hands slowly falling toward the floor, vision blurred. As his thoughts faded away, the room began to flood a vibrant blue. A figure greeted him with a smile, the mass of colour forming a beautiful tall woman. Her eyes weren't visible, but Ethan could tell she was looking at him. Her hand reached for his, he phased through it, he forced himself upright, cautiously standing in front of her. She smiled again, turning to leave the room, her steps elegant, almost regal, someone bathed in a high status.

The hall was dark, quiet, the only sign of life came from Tama's office down the hall as he whittled away at his remaining tasks. The moon hung high in the sky, illuminating the hall, the woman looked radiant, a sight unlike any other. Ethan followed as she crept into Gabranth's room, she stood at his bedside, her smile faded, hand reaching for him yet it could never truly reach his.

She lingered on his form, he was trying to sleep again, his body tossing and turning among the sheets, beads of sweat fell from his forehead, his fingers gripped the blanket while he murmured quietly under his breath. As she grazed his face, the discomfort vanished, leaving him peaceful. Ethan watched for a moment, but as he turned to leave, she spoke. "Wait" He stopped, her voice was soft, panicked, desperate. He turned her way, she held her hands together a moment, the glow brighter, her palms pulled apart. She waved it across the sleeping man, blue engulfed him, another version of him sat up, younger, hair long, stubble on his chin, a smile on his face. He had an object in his hands; he was talking but no words came out. The woman took her place at his side, conversing as though reliving an active memory. "I'm sure he'd love to hear it when he's older." She placed a hand on his face, he looked so gentle, content, relaxed. The item in his hands was a small metal box, buttons lined the side, a tiny window at the front, he held it so cautiously, like he was afraid of breaking it. The way the two images interacted gave Ethan pause, this woman, the way she looked at him, the long elven ears, the voice, the smile. The way she so tenderly touched his father's form.

"...Mom?"

Chapter 11

Ethan's eyes snapped open, he lurched forward, hand on his chest. He was in his room, on the floor, the pile of broken machinery in front of him. Mind a blur with confusion, he'd been walking, she was- he glanced around the room, the eery, quiet, empty room. There was only the fading light of the moon that came from the hallway. His arms rested on his knees, breath steadying. "I was dreaming?" he shook his head. Of course he was, he was still here, unmoved, yet somehow time had passed, the moon higher, though not by much. *What was she trying to show me? The box?* His own curiosity was going to be his undoing; he found himself compelled to get up.

He gripped the bed, pulling himself to his feet, cautious not to knock anything over. He tentatively made his way into the hall, hand pressed against the wall as if to steady himself, groggier than he'd have liked. His father's door was ajar, inviting, while also being closed off. Peering through the crack, the dark made it difficult to see, he could make out the shape of a large figure on the bed, laying down, a few belongings strewn across the floor. As Ethan inched a little closer the door creaked open. The silhouette shifted, for a

flicker of a moment the man's tattoo on his shoulder was white, tinted in a pink and purplish hue. Ethan blinked twice, unsure if he was seeing things.

"Hello?"

Ethan tensed, awkwardly standing in the doorframe, nervous. **"Uh... sorry."** He sheepishly glanced to the floor. He was already stepping out of his comfort zone but that object was plaguing his thoughts.

"Ethan? Are you okay?"

Ethan felt a sting; he'd heard those words so damned often. Of course he wasn't, the fleeting moments of joy he felt were always pulled away. That looming dread that his freedom was so close to being over. But regardless, he gave an awkward smile, nodding lightly. It was easier than telling them the problem and having it dismissed. **"I um. Gah, it's going to sound really weird."** His cheeks rapidly heated, turning a bright shade of red visible within the dark. Gabranth sat himself up, back against the headboard. He waited patiently, no judgement, no expectations. **"...did you have a I-little metal box?"** Ethan spat out.

The man made no initial reaction; he seemed more surprised than anything. He stared at him for a short while before moving, he pulled the covers back as he inched off the bed, reaching down for his pants pocket. He wore a pair of baggy patterned pajamas, obviously a size or two too big, more than likely from Tama. He took out a tiny metal box that'd fit in the palm of one's hand, it was relatively flat, dented in a few parts. He was hesitant to pass it over, holding it ever so delicately. **"What'd you want it for?"** he asked.

"Uh...I really do sound weird. I had...a memory? Of it, I don't know if that's the right word."

Gabranth glanced back at the object, he frowned, turning it over a few times in his fingers. **"It doesn't work anymore. You can look at it, but be careful with it."** He held it Ethan's way, hesitant, as the boy gripped it, his grasp firmed.

"I'll be careful with it. I promise." He gave a brief smile, and Gabranth let it go. Ethan turned it around in his fingers, it was so tidy, he had no idea what it was for, but it was interesting none the less. He paused as he noticed an indent difficult to see, it looked vaguely familiar, but he couldn't quite place it in the dark. **"Is it okay if I pop it open?"** Gabranth froze, the anxiety palpable. **"I might be able to fix it."** Ethan attempted to reassure him, but it did nothing for Gabranth's concerns, still he nodded lightly. Ethan sat on the floor, back against the bed, while he began fiddling with it, Gabranth lit a candle, watching the boy create small tools with his own blue magic.

He curiously hovered nearby, his son took great care in taking the item apart, each small adjustment made Gabranth's heart tighten, caught in a vice of his own making. *What if it broke further? If the items inside shattered?* His anxieties ran rampant, but he forced himself to sit, quietly waiting. He'd heard Ethan's recent victory regarding something in the kitchen, and he knew their relationship wouldn't improve if he didn't put trust in him first.

The boy's focus was like no other, the rest of the world didn't exist, it was only him and the object in hand, each piece was carefully set aside in a way he could remember how it was constructed, he muttered quietly under his breath, reviewing everything as he put it down on the floor. He pulled apart the last part of the case, tapping a finger on his chin. **"This thing records voice?"** he asked. Gabranth's eyes widened, how could he tell just by looking at the pieces? There weren't many, a few metal parts that made up the outer cover, a strange tape with square holes, a wire hanging in the centre through a chunk

of tiny orange crystal shards. Two small spinning needles were connected at one point of the side, powered when a button was pressed.

"Yeah." Gabranth said quietly, awkwardly watching as Ethan picked up one part of the case.

"Hm. I think I've got it." His hand lit up blue, a tiny flat shaped hammer gripped tightly, he swung it against the case, each strike made Gabranth visibly cringe, his hands retreated toward his chest. He'd pulled himself further and further back, eventually he was unable to see anything. Only the boy's intense focus. He closed his eyes, so many sounds flooding in, consuming everything else. He could barely hear the whispers; his own apprehension so much louder. Every twist of metal, click, spin, clunk, it set his anxiety aflame.

"Hey Champ." Time halted, eyes snapped open, mouth agape. That voice. How long had it been? **"Gods this is really embarrassing, I'm talking to a box! It's working right? I'm not just...talking to myself."** a loud sigh came after, then after a brief pause, the voice chirped up again. **"You said you needed something to focus on, and I know...I won't always be there to yap for ya. So, I asked Laz for something that could do that for me... gods I hope it's working, I still feel weird talking to it, it's so damned tiny. He's laughing at me by the way, I don't know if you can hear him, but I'm going to kick his ass if this doesn't work."**

The two were speechless, Ethan's attention had been captivated by this tiny box, the mention of Laz only gripped him further, he brought it closer at the mention of his laugh, sure enough a glorious guttural hoot came from the back, unapologetic, gasping for breath. It was his. He turned back to his father, expecting praise, or at least a smile. Something wet hit his cheek, then another, as he glanced upward the bulk of muscle shivered in place. As he noticed Ethan's gaze, he furiously wiped his face. Ethan clicked the button on the side, the audio stopped, the room fell silent apart from a few short snuffles coming from the man desperately trying to hide it. Ethan held the item up, though his father took a moment to regain his composure. The moment he realized he was offered it back, he took it gently, cradling it like a precious gem. He clicked the button again. **"Hey Champ."** Those words almost broke him again, he hit the button, replaying that phrase over and over. Ethan could only sit and watch as each time the word champ filled the room, this man folded over. He finally reached a point where he let it run, the tears started back up but he smiled beneath it all. **"...thank you, kiddo"**

"...You're. Welcome." Ethan sat startled. He could hear Laz's voice again, but it felt so fleeting, the person talking had such a strong presence. They sounded a little awkward, but after a while it faded into the confidence of a story teller. He'd laugh between sentences, he held so much charisma, yet his voice was soft... comforting. Gabranth couldn't take his eyes off it, his hands shaking, lip trembling. That smile remained. There was a pain so vividly stained in his eyes. **"Who, is that?"** Ethan asked. His father was startled, as though he'd forgotten a second person was in the room. He struggled to speak. He had to stop the noise, taking in a moment of silence. His voice shaky, quiet, worn.

"my dad." He whispered.

Ethan's eyes widened, that's what his grandfather sounded like? It was so different to the judgemental words he'd dealt with growing up. **"Can you play it again?"** he asked quietly. Gabranth's eyes lit up, the only sound heard was that familiar click of the button. **"Hey Champ."** Gabranth's eyes closed, listening closely to that tone, that warmth in his voice. The laugh in the background. Ethan let his weight drop against the bed, he wondered what this man looked like. His vision began to fade after a time, the air oddly warm, comforting.

As morning came, the hall became vibrant once more; Kaizen's footsteps were easy to distinguish from the others. He paced the hall, looking for a missing Ethan. He'd passed Gabranth's door multiple times, not once popping in as it wasn't likely he was in here. Kimiko's voice joined the fray, loudly calling his name while stomping across the floorboards. The boy had fallen asleep on the floor; head rested against a pillow his father had slipped underneath him. With all the noise Ethan stirred, he groaned first, annoyed, Kimiko's antics had led to Ty joining in while also being half asleep. **"Nng...you're so loud."** He rolled over, hands gripping the pillow, stuffing it hard against his ears. Face squashed against the cold hard floor. Gabranth chuckled lightly, startling the boy. He shot upright, hair a mess, one cheek red, drool staining his chin. He hurriedly cleaned himself up while sputtering. **"Oh. Shit. Uh, sorry. I didn't mean to fall asleep..."**

"N-no. It's fine..." His voice trailed off, the smile remained. Ethan's eyes widened, Gabranth was smiling again, he almost looked like someone else. The boy scooted backward just a little, making it easier to see his father's face. They both sat in silence, that awkwardness radiating around the room. Neither one sure how to break the ice or continue a conversation that often ended up so one sided. Gabranth held up the object after a time, the smile a little wider. **"Thank you for this."**

"Y-your welcome." Ethan shrunk. He smiled on his own, happy though he didn't want to admit it. Laz's laugh rang through his mind, an old question he'd had burning for so long spiralled in his thoughts, but he couldn't bring himself to ask. Instead standing, **"I should...probably tell them where I am."** He said quietly.

"Y-yeah."

He shuffled out of the room, pushing the door too as he entered the hall. The light had yet to reach this part of the house, the sun glimmering from the other side, the air cool, calm except for the three calling for him a short distance away, with a quiet sigh he headed their way, hoping to quell their shouting, a noise came from the room behind. That same calming voice. He smiled, listening intently until his own strides faded it into the distance.

As the small group of four were reunited, Kaizen draped his arm around Ethan's shoulders, pulling him toward the kitchen for breakfast. They ate as a group, Tama included, the other person who typically lived here had headed off for a job on their own, still not yet being introduced. Gabranth had yet to join them, huddled away in his room, the door open a smidge further than it'd been prior. The moment food ended, Kimiko smacked Ethan hard on the shoulder, her face close to his. **"Don't die while I'm out alright?"** she teased before pushing him in his chair.

He glared at her to start with, then the confusion set in. **"Wait, you're going?"** he asked.

"Yeah, it's just a quick job." She scooped up a thick book bag, throwing it over her shoulder.

"When are you coming back?" Ethan's voice panicked, he was so used to her presence, the idea she'd be gone if someone realized he was here was nerve wracking.

"I'll be back soon, just chill. Enjoy life, remember?" She winked, spinning around while she walked backwards out the door. Tama and Kaizen, both wished her well, she gave a swift wave, the clack of her boots vanishing as she walked out of earshot.

Ty glanced up only after she'd left, his mouth full. **"Mmph! Did shish leaf?"** he asked. He looked to Tama first; after receiving a nod he turned to Kaizen, another confirmation caused him to bolt out the door after her, food swallowed awkwardly. **"WAIITTTTT! You forgot the stick of greatness!"** his voice carried down the hall, along a parade of thudding steps as he disappeared. Ethan glanced back to the other two, who'd returned to their prior activities as though this was the day by day.

Kaizen slumped in his chair, creaking it loudly. His arms sprawled along the table, the procrastination heavy as he glared at the door. **"Just get it over with Kaizen, then you can go play."** Tama spoke while cleaning the dishes, content enough to do the task by hand.

"Yeah.... but I don't wanna."

As Ethan watched their exchange, he pondered a little, he still didn't know what he wanted, but the little he did know was that he didn't want to go home, and being strong made that slightly more viable. But Kimiko just disappeared for who knows how long. He bit his bottom lip, foot bouncing a tad as he glanced back up to Kaizen, still groaning about his workload. **"Kaizen?"** he awkwardly shifted in his seat, a little nervous.

"What's up?"

He froze a bit, struggling to ask. **"Would you be willing to spar with me? I was going to ask Kimiko but...she just left."**

"I don't mind; we can do that right now-"

"You're finishing paperwork. Do you want Brom to tell you off again?" Tama interrupted.

The man shuddered, before his head hit the table. **"Tomorrow. We can do that tomorrow."** He grumbled.

"Thanks." Ethan smiled briefly, he stood himself up, politely pushing his chair in before looking to the hall, he had a few things he could occupy himself with, and a few questions he needed to figure out. **"Oh. And thank you for breakfast"**

"You're welcome darling." The air around the large man washing dishes had grown light and fluffy, a small ball of sunshine despite his blank exterior. Ethan took that chance to disappear to his room, happy to delve into the pile of things he could fix. As he passed his father's room, he glimpsed inside, the figure lay on the bed, the comforting voice playing in the background. Ethan tapped his fingers on the doorframe before slipping into his own room, pulling the door closed. He plopped on the floor with the intention of a nice day to himself doing something he rarely got to indulge in.

It took until noon before there was much movement, Gabranth had snuck out of his room heading into the kitchen. Ethan could vaguely hear him as the floorboards creaked beneath his steps. Followed by Tama's voice, a tone that forever felt booming regardless of how quiet he spoke. The man was asked what he was looking for, Ethan couldn't tell what they said, but the question lingered. He had to answer the same, he was mostly recovered, which meant he had options. Tiring of people making decisions for him despite the nature of their choice, wanting to fail or succeed on his own, like his time with Kimiko.

He rested his back against the pillows, hands toward the floor. The item in his hands had fallen to the pile in front of him. He stared at it, then the window, the sun giving off that inviting light. He grinned, scuffing

his feet as he jumped up, scrambling out the door. He walked briskly down the hall, through the living room, out the door. He circled part of the house first, passing by the kitchen, Kaizen's office, where one could see him overly bored, barely scribbling his name on a few papers before getting distracted. Ethan continued on his way, enjoying his short roam of the area, he headed into the thick of the woods. A flood of different smells hit him all at once, his eyes closed, taking in the atmosphere. A few critters ran by; he returned his gaze to the forest floor. If he got lost, he could climb a tree and see their house, so he wasn't overly concerned. But he wouldn't go too far.

He walked aimlessly, enjoying the sights of overgrown trees, ivy winding up the trunks and into the branches, stealing away the sunlight for itself. The dirt beneath his feet carried a range of objects from twigs and leaves, to a variety of plants similar to those he'd seen on their trip here. There were parts of the brush that'd been clearly trodden through recently, thick prints and packed dirt, most likely from Kaizen whose office was nearby. Ethan ducked underneath a low branch, hand brushing the leaves out of view as he came to a small clearing, flickers of sunlight seeping through the trees, creating an interesting pattern on the ground below. The edge of the space had large trees, probably hundreds of years old, covered in moss, ferns, ivy. He ran his hand along one he liked while he circled it, its branches leaned downward, creating an interesting curtain. The bark was similar to burnt wood, the leaves within the sunlight gave off a prism of colours that shone across the ground.

While looking it over, he spotted a bag, nothing fancy, it was more like a blanket wrapped around some random items, tied at the top. The nostalgia hit him first, as he used to do the same, then he realized, there was a *bag here*. Close enough to Kaizen's place that it felt oddly out of place. He doubted he'd leave it there, or anyone from the house. Maybe it was Ty's? He leaned a bit closer, glancing at it. Where'd it come from? Should he take it back? **"AH! Hands off!!"** A grouchy tone came from overhead, young. Ethan flinched, stepping back while skyward, spotting a particularly strange figure in the tree. **"Don't make me come down there! I'll chase ya."** They continued.

"Sorry. I won't touch it. I was just surprised to see it there."

"...Hm. Okay, I'll believe ya for now. But I'm watchin ya!" They showed two of their fingers, pointing in Ethan's direction to start with and then to their eyes. Ethan awkwardly took a step back, his hand loosely rubbing the back of his head. The figure leapt down to a lower branch, they hung upside down as it pulled down from their weight, slowing to a stop in front of Ethan. Their form was small, wearing shorts, a fairly baggy shirt, with a jacket overtop, sleeves pushed half way up. Their clothes were overly colourful, mismatched, torn and stitched back together sloppily. Their body was covered in fur, a shorter snout with a large black nose. Their eyes a deep black, oddly empty yet full of curiosity. Two long pointed ears dangled toward the ground. **"Ya don't gotta be nervous. I ain't gonna bite ya or nothing."** They teased, spinning around the branch onto the top, scrambling up higher. A tail wagged behind them, overly fluffy and curled.

"Thanks?" Ethan watched them inquisitively; they climbed so quickly. Part of him wanted to join them, the branches seemingly went on forever, he wanted to see the top.

"So, what's a city boy like you doing out here?" The figure asked after settling high up. Their legs swaying playfully.

"I'm-" Ethan paused, a flood of memories of his previous betrayal. He shouldn't mention too much. **"I was just taking a walk."** He said quietly. **"What about you?"**

“I’m proving a point!” They swung around, hanging with their arms this time.

“Proving a point?” Ethan asked, he’d found himself slowly inching toward the tree, the temptation to climb only growing.

“Yeah, I got told I couldn’t do anything on my own, and I said I could.” They spun around dropping to a lower part of the tree. **“You coming up? You’re makin my neck hurt.”**

With the invitation given Ethan grinned, briskly making his way up the tree, the thicker branches made for a great climb, though his side ached midway. He sat himself down nearby, legs dangling, hands gripping the bark. **“I take it you’ll be going home soon then?”**

“Bored of me already? We just met mate.”

“Oh, no. I just...uh.”

They lightly hit Ethan in the arm, a grin on their face. **“I’m kidding. City boys are so uptight.”**

“Why do you keep calling me that? I don’t even look like one” Ethan scowled.

“You’re too polite, and your clothes are clean, and ya smell like cleaning stuff.” They had their nose upturned, waving one hand in front as though it was an obvious stench. **“Plus, you’re an elf.”**

“I’ll have you know I travel a lot. I crossed the border before the last cycle of Losar.” Ethan boasted.

“What!? Really? Ya crossed the big ole border? NAAAH you’re pulling my leg.” Their excitement was mixed with skepticism.

” It’s true! I wouldn’t lie about something like that. In fact, I’m going to Lumire-” his sentence ended midway, the realisation he did in fact know what he wanted, but that selfish choice was not always one he could choose.

“Ooh, I bet it’ll be perfect for a city boy like ya.” They swung back round, seated firmly. A very cocky look on their face. **“I’m gonna leave the continent one day.”**

“Isn’t it impossible?” Ethan asked.

“You poor naïve city boy. I’ve seen an outsider. Even better, they were an orc.” They put two fingers to their bottom lip, coming up from below like tusks. Ethan looked unimpressed, there were only so many fables one could hear before even he wouldn’t believe them. **“It’s true! He was green, had a really big beard. I saw him when I was young, he sang songs about a place outside.”**

Ethan sat in disbelief; orcs were a fairytale. Yet that description was oddly stirring, the visions of people he saw in that tiny broken town, a few had tusks like that, tall and strong looking. Maybe if he had the chance, if his body lasted long enough, he could venture out even further. He shrunk in place, it’d never happen, even going to Lumire was a stretch, but if he really wanted to, he could probably make that trip, he was stronger, smarter, he knew how to survive even on his own. He desperately wanted to see Laz, Vin, to explore once more. This odd new friend’s point of view had only heightened that desire.

“Really?” Ethan asked, his curiosity getting the better of him. It wasn't long before the day whittled away, night creeping in while the two eagerly chatted. The atmosphere was quiet, relaxed, the opposite of the house not too far away. Everyone ran through the hall, pure panic on Kaizen's face as he peered into every room, slamming doors open, running up and down the stairs. He checked the front yard, the back, the garden. Ethan was nowhere to be found, no one had any idea how long he'd been gone. Tama joined the search, as had Ty. Gabranth grew more concerned as the whole house began looking into the woods. He too forced himself to leave his room in the effort of lending a hand.

Kaizen's breath was ragged, he stormed through parts of the forest, cautious to call Ethan's name aloud in case anyone from the city had tracked him this far. He was outside their barrier, one that'd kept him safe from any predator that'd come his way, but they'd never told him that. He had no idea the danger he could have put himself in. He pushed through the brush, the dense flora crushing beneath him. Tama was more careful as he trod along, his hair tied back in full. He was in his element, the darkness no hindrance at all. He only covered one side during the day when the harsh light caused eye strain. He scanned the ground for tracks, listening intently for anything other than the usual wildlife they had in the area. Ty wandered the expanse aimlessly, believing they were playing a game. The usual for him. Gabranth stayed closer to the building, only going a short distance in, then circling the area. He didn't want to get lost himself, creating a bigger problem.

The dark played on his mind, whispers collided with the critters of the woods, his steps drowned out by a voice in one ear. It plagued him, thoughts of what could go wrong being loudly played back to him. His shoulder flickered white at times, but he shook it off. *If he disappears it's my fault. He left because of me.* His insecurities came back at him time and time again, that constant reminder, those worries that lingered deep down. He stopped walking, hand lightly brushing a tree, his weight to one side. It was near overwhelming when he was on his own, he could punch something, but that pain wouldn't last, this thing would come back with a fury. One foot slid forward, then the other, his hand slipped from the tree, sweat falling down his face, the lack of sleep had been catching up to him on top of it all. It plagued his dreams, it had a hold on him he couldn't get rid of, since that night in Nova. It'd only gotten worse.

He managed a few more steps, picking up the pace. Words from a time long past lingered in the air. *Focus, it'll sort itself out if you focus on other things.* It felt like a lie. Focus helped a little, but those problems were always there. Once focus waned, he was lost, left to deal with it head on. It coiled around him, invisible to those on the outside, but everything felt heavy, suffocating, the idea of giving in a bigger temptation in hopes it'd be silent. He kept walking, mind trying so hard to pay attention to his surroundings, the task at hand. He doubted himself, his ability to help, he'd end up as another problem. As he rounded another tree the sound of laughter stopped him. The voice calmed faintly, there were two people talking without a care, one familiar. One not.

He peered around, cautious not to make noise. It was only as he looked up that he spotted them, a faint blue light sprinkled along parts of the branch. Ethan was grinning, talking with his hands flailing in the air, time forgotten. The beast man at his side just as energetic, the two seemingly trying to outdo each other in conversation until both erupted into laughter. He leaned against the nearest tree, arms folded, their joy drowning out that consistent doubt. After a short time, he realized he had no way of contacting the others. He began to distance himself, heading back toward the house. Tama was half way, dragging Ty behind him as he'd scratched his knee on the journey. He swiftly ran himself over, giving a rough explanation before returning to Ethan's location. A caution to ease his own mind.

As he rounded one tree, their voices picked up again, a clear joy between them both as they waffled on about something beyond his comprehension. To keep himself hidden, he leaned against a nearby tree,

just out of view. He listened with a gentle smile hard to hide as the boy made a friend. The voice in his ear dwindled the longer they talked, a small part of him couldn't help but think. *He's just like her.*

It took another hour before Ethan realized the time, the two parted ways in a hurry, scrambling down the tree, a race their last interaction before both ran in different directions, never really knowing if they'd see each other again later. Ethan radiated joy, he had fun, he'd learned small things he never knew about the city he'd grown up in, it was surreal meeting someone who lived on the outskirts of a place he'd barely gotten to explore, telling him of all the places he could see should he go back, it gave him hope. He ran through the woods, followed at a distance by his father. Never the wiser that he'd been watched.

By the time Gabranth had stumbled through the kitchen door, dinner had been set on the table, a plate set aside for him as well. Ethan was being razed by Kaizen, his hand furiously tousling his hair. **"You goofball you're supposed to tell us where you're going."** He complained.

"I'm sorry, I only intended on a short walk, I lost track of time." Ethan's hands attempted to combat Kaizen's, unable to garner enough strength to halt it entirely. Gabranth quietly began to move around the table, heading toward the hall. He picked up his plate on the way, intending to eat in his room.

"You can join us." Tama said quietly, taking his own place at the table.

The muscle man paused; Ethan was watching him now that Kaizen had ceased his playful teasing. **"Yeah, come on, we have an extra chair."** The dragon piped up. He gestured toward the empty chair beside Ethan while beginning to shovel food into his mouth.

"Uh..." Gabranth tensed, but with everyone looking, he cautiously took a seat, clearly uncomfortable as he wasn't sure how to act. Ty took no notice of anyone else, the only thing in front of him was his food, he ate like his father, forcefully shovelling too much into his face, unable to think of two things at once, he'd have to stop to take a breath.

The meal was pleasant, though Gabranth picked at his food whenever someone looked his way. Apart from Ty, who in his boredom had decided to go play in his room, everyone else had stuck around. **"You'll still spar with me tomorrow, right?"** Ethan asked, as he pushed his plate forward.

Kaizen grinned, one thumb up. **"Course. We can do that early in the morning if you want"**

Ethan seemed pleased, he scooped his plate up, then Kaizen's and Tamas. Gabranth flinched, his food not yet done, but now that people were cleaning, he felt out of place. He continued to eat slowly, staring at the table. His son cleaned everything in the sink. **"Thank you darling. I'll be off my loves. I've got some medications to finish."** Tama lightly patted Ethan on the shoulder while passing by.

Kaizen turned to Gabranth, a big smile, head in one hand as he leaned on the table. **"It's nice to have you join us."**

Gabranth glimpsed his son, concerned he'd overstepped. Ethan hadn't changed at all, still happily cleaning the dishes. **"...Y-yeah."** Gabranth sputtered out, he took a few more bites, there wasn't much left, but it'd begun to grow cold.

"You could always join us tomorrow."

The man felt his entire body chill, the mere idea of joining a sparring match made him feel ill. **"...No. I-it's okay. My arm is ... still healing."** An excuse, he didn't feel anything on that arm, but he'd lean on it for the moment.

"It'd be cool to see you two spar." Ethan leaned against the table.

"I'd be up for it whenever you wanna." Kaizen grinned. **"I'm always down for a good scuffle, maybe we can give that a go when you feel better"**

The man swiftly finished the last of his meal; he gently placed the fork on the plate. Ethan reached over for it, taking it without a word. **"Oh. Uh. You don't-"**

" It's fine, I don't mind." He brought the plate over to the sink, happily washing the last one. Gabranth fidgeted, sparring was uncommon at this point, he was wary of how much damage he could do. But everyone was accommodating, he felt obligated to eventually try to join in. As Ethan finished his chore, he yawned loudly. **"G'night. I'll see you in the morning."** He waved Kaizen off, though as he reached the door he stopped, he paused for a moment. **"Good night."** He said quietly, before disappearing down the hall.

Gabranth's eyes widened, he'd been so surprised he hadn't a chance to answer him. **"Well look at that. You guys seem to be doing better."** Kaizen leaned back in his chair, one arm resting on the top, elbow hanging off the edge. **"Mm."** Gabranth couldn't hide the smile, his arms rested on the table, body leaning forward slightly. After a bit of silence, Kaizen shuffled in his chair **"Have you figured out what you wanted to do yet?"**

Gabranth looked up, he'd been pondering it for a few days. There was so much damage to account for, and he couldn't keep running from it. His brows furrowed, expression the most serious Kaizen had seen since he got here. **"I want to help."** His tone filled with sincerity. It was a shock compared to the meek personality he'd had the past few days.

"We'd be happy to have ya." Kaizen hit him in the shoulder. **"You're part of the family. Buuuut don't think that will stop me from giving you a bunch of work"** He stood himself up with a chuckle, stretching himself out. **"I'm also gonna hit the hay; Ethan is going to be upset if I get up late. I'll catch you later."**

"Wait, Kaizen." Gabranth hurriedly stood from his chair as Kaizen went to leave. **"I appreciate it."**

"Anytime buddy." He gave a brief wave before continuing on his way, the wooden boards groaning underneath the weight of each step. Midway down the hall a snap could be heard, followed by immediate panic. Tama's voice came soon after, nagging the man who'd apparently broken a floorboard. Gabranth chuckled lightly, the joy interrupted as the voice returned, nestled so close to his ear. It came so suddenly he found himself catching his breath, hands on the table. The more tired he got, the worse it seemed to be. He glanced to the kitchen door, deciding he'd do some exercise in hopes it'd keep his focus on something else.

The moment the sun peaked over the treetops Ethan was up, his usual travel clothing cleaned, the hole in the side of his shirt stitched up. His necklace was where it should be, though the stone was cracked lightly. He stretched himself out, the scar on his side still a tad tender, but otherwise fine. His smaller wounds weren't even a consideration. While he enjoyed the smell of the morning dew, and Kaizen had yet to wake, he'd begun testing out his old moves, his hands clasped together, pulling apart to reveal a long

glowing pole. It felt like forever since he'd last tried it, he spun it around, striking a nearby tree. As the thud of the hit rang in his ears he grinned, he still had control, though he felt a little rusty.

He swung again, though paused as he heard rustling in the nearby brush. He tightened his grip, with the house just behind him, he felt oddly calm. A figure emerged slowly from the darkness, swaying, heavy breath, visible sweat hit the floor. One hand covered part of their face, as they stepped into the light, their tired green eyes glanced the boy over. He tried to smile, though something seemed off. The pole vanished from Ethan's hands; he took a step forward. **"Uh... are you-"**

"I'm okay. Just really...really tired." Gabranth's voice was weak, strained as though he'd been yelling throughout the night. He looked like he hadn't slept a wink.

As he wandered past Ethan, he stumbled a bit, catching himself. The boy's hand caught his shoulder, that blue glow still there. It was as though something suddenly changed, the man's demeanor was less rigid, like a ton of tension left him all at once. **"Did you want a hand?"**

The man lightly shook his head. **"I appreciate the thought. But I'll be alright."** He gave a smile, genuine, it was short-lived however as he swayed in place. The exhaustion was beginning to play on his mind; one could tell he'd be out the moment he hit a pillow. Ethan moved to help him regardless, but paused as a loud yawn rumbled the ground beneath his feet, scaring away multiple birds.

Kaizen haphazardly walked outside, passing Gabranth who continued on his way. Ethan found himself conflicted, as his father passed through the kitchen door, he decided to leave him be. He closed the door behind him, Ethan could've sworn he saw a small blue butterfly settled on the man's shoulder, though he didn't make one. **"You ready?"** Kaizen asked, snapping Ethan back to their previous plans.

A deep breath, hands bathed in blue, eyes narrow, gaze fixed on his opponent. Stance wide, body tense yet joints loose. His opponent wore more than usual, a brown bandana wrapped around his neck, a bad attempt to combat the cold morning air. His hands sat at his side, a stance unmotivated, easily broken. Ethan took the chance to start, he came in strong, sprinting at his opponent, fists clenched, body twisting as a spark of blue threw Kaizen off balance. Ethan threw a punch with all his weight, gravity on his side as the force of his jump added to its strength. Kaizen raised an arm, so nonchalant, careless, but it blocked Ethan without a shred of difficulty. It was like hitting a brick wall, unmoving despite the force. He pushed the kid back, a grin on his face. **"Gotta try a bit harder-"** as he spoke, he tumbled backward, his leg giving out midway. Ethan erupted into a roar of laughter as Kaizen rolled around on the floor, struggling to stand for a moment. He sent a light jab Ethan's way, hitting harder than intended. The boy flew backward, he threw his head back, his hands grazing the grass, he used the momentum to flip himself over, landing on his feet. **"Oop, sorry!"** Ethan wanted no apology, sprinting toward him. He didn't slow as he got too close, instead jumping off a small platform underfoot, he landed behind him, dropped low, sweeping his leg. The initial swing did nothing, like hitting a rock, but Ethan wasn't having it, he couldn't be useless forever in a fight. His leg exploded in blue; it was like its shape changed, forcing Kaizen's first leg off balance.

He tumbled down, allowing Ethan to try another strike as he got up. Kaizen blocked it, barely. He smirked, a little more fired up as his gaze changed. The boy flinched, knocked back again. He tumbled over himself, landing flat on the grass. Their exchange continued, Kaizen rarely had to change position, merely combatting the few hits Ethan was throwing his way, but it was like this kid was insisting on using his aura

with each assault. They were hitting harder, their range wider. He caught his next one, holding him off the ground. He was wasting it, so blatantly, but he seemed happier, faster each time he did it. *One short spar could be, okay?*

The barrage continued, Kaizen's gaze fixated on Ethan's movements, he could see him wearing down after a time, the strong blue visual that accompanied each attack was dwindling, too much energy expended for short term gain. Kaizen barely moved, easily blocking each attack. As one more came toward his arm, a wave of aura flowed with it, causing an inner sting Kaizen didn't expect. He waved Ethan down a moment, smiling. **"Seems like you're in good shape."** Kaizen lightly gripped his shoulder, moving his arm around while Ethan attempted to catch his breath.

The boy looked pleased, the exchange feeling more normal after so many days of tension and over concern. **"Thanks, you're a heck of a sparring partner."** His legs ached, the desperate want for a bit of relief gave him reason to sit down on the grass, landing rather harshly. **"I'm beat."** He let out a short sigh, while his head hung back, body leaning against both arms.

Kaizen joined him, chuckling. **"Yeah, I could use a break."** He sat across from him, a lingering question in his throat. **"So...Kimiko got back last night, she said you guys are going to leave soon?"** he asked.

Ethan was caught off guard, he stared at him a moment before smiling, of course she'd make the decision all by herself. But he didn't want to lose that chance, he wanted to travel, that burning desire was there and it was more likely he'd be able to if he had someone to travel with. **"If she'll have me. I'd like to get back on the road."**

Kaizen almost fell over at the realization she'd not asked him before making plans. Though he couldn't say much as he'd done the same. He gave a smile, lightly patting Ethan on the shoulder. **"You know, you're more than welcome to stick around."**

"I appreciate the offer.... But I'd like to travel first. There's a lot of places I'd like to explore if I get the chance."

"Fair enough, just come back to visit from time to time." The dragon leaned back, purposefully avoiding pressure on his shoulder while stretching out his legs.

"I will." Ethan leaned forward, hands in his lap, back hunched. He glanced at their surroundings, taking in the atmosphere, he felt lighter knowing he'd be back on the road soon. Though as his eyes hit the kitchen door, he paused. **".... Did you know what...he is going to do?"** His leg began bouncing, anticipating a sour outcome.

"Gabranth?" He waited for the hesitant nod. **"He said he'd stick around, give us a hand."**

Ethan's eyes widened. He was staying? His leg stopped, limbs relaxed, head raised. **"Really?"** He asked again, receiving reaffirmation. He sat in silence for a moment, staring off into the distance as he attempted to process it. **"Wow... that's honestly surprising. I kinda thought he'd... just go back"**

"...you say that, but he basically gave everything up the moment he helped you out back at the hunters guild."

“...I guess so.” The boy slumped, he wasn’t sure how to feel about it, part of him was happy, it meant his father was within reach, but at the same time, the man’s life was ruined, because of a dumb decision on his part. While pondering on his own thoughts, he heard Kaizen lay down, reminding him of the company. **“So, uh... I’ve been meaning to ask, what do you actually do? Kimiko never told me, which is surprising because she normally doesn’t shut up.”**

“Yeah, sounds about right.” Kaizen chuckled, he rolled in Ethan’s direction, making it easier to face him. **“We patrol the forest closer to the border. Sometimes people from the magic hunter’s guild pass through from the other side, and they pick up anyone they can get their hands on, selling them in the black market or giving them to the Lumire guards”** He paused, his expression growing dim, tone quieter, sad. **“Sadly, similarly would’ve happened to you.”** Ethan flinched, realizing he was probably in more danger than he initially thought. **“We do our best to stop that from happening.”**

He vaguely remembered his captors talking about a reward, but that was all. He had little idea why they’d want him in the first place; he wasn’t particularly valuable with a time limit hanging over his head. Things weren’t this eventful while they travelled for the past year **“...I didn’t think things were this bad. We barely noticed anything while travelling.”**

“Yeah, well the biggest threats are around the border. Most other places don’t typically deal with it. Until more recently. They’ve gotten bolder.”

“They changed tactics?”

“Yeah, I’m not sure what’s going on either. Things have been kind of strange in Lumire for a while. Fluff said someone else came into power last year, the same time things started to heat up.” Ethan’s quizzical expression gave him pause; he lightly rubbed the back of his head. **“Oh, yeah sorry. It’s a nickname for someone who lives in Lumire, the less we know about her the better.”**

“Oh, that makes sense. I guess it’s better to stay away from the border right now?”

“That’d be for the best. I sent someone up that way, so if you get stuck, they’ll be around. I’ll have to go pick her up at some point.” Ethan nodded, glad there was some kind of help should they need it. Though he knew Kimiko was too proud to ask for it. The two returned to the calm silence, Ethan’s head slowly lowered as he thought about their predicament, his fingers brushed against the grass, lightly pulling a blade before pulling it to pieces. Most of what he wanted to see was across that border. Laz, Vin. The city of Lumire, the place his father once called home. As the piece of grass he’d picked up was in tatters he plucked another. Which way would they go then? He didn’t want to hang around this area, the likelihood of being spotted was so much stronger.

The kitchen door snapped open, creaking in the distance, Ethan barely noticed, but Kaizen sat himself back up. A blue tail swished, ears perked high, a smug smile on a light skinned face as someone stopped short of the duo. **“Hey guys~ Watcha doin?”**

“Taking a break” As Kaizen spoke, she leaned down, using his head as her perch. One arm dangling over his face, while the other held her head up, elbow burrowed into his scales. She wore an overly baggy sweater, covering parts of her thighs, black shorts underneath it, her feet bare. Hair down, falling down the sides of her arched back.

“Oh, while you’re here I was going to ask where you were going, and when you’re leaving.”

“Yeah, I’d like to know too, since you haven’t even asked me yet.”

Kimiko tilted her head, already bored. She glanced at her nails. **“We’re going to Lumire.”**

“.... what?” Both looked shocked, they took a moment to realize what she said, Kaizen moved, knocking her from her perch. Their mutual surprise gave her glee; she stood herself back up, hands on her hips.

“Tomorrow.”

“HUH?!” Ethan spat out. Kimiko smirked while her companion scramble to his feet. He tried to question her decisions but was met with her glee. After getting nowhere, Ethan resigned to his fate of leaving sooner than he expected, with Kaizen unable to persuade her otherwise.

A collection of mugs and glasses clinked in a well-lit living room, an uneventful day all but gone. Laughter filled the walls, a loose cheer as multiple people rested comfortably in their chairs. Kimiko threw her head back, bottle high as she chugged it quickly, Ethan, Kaizen and Ty cheering her on. She let out a happy sigh as she finished the last drop, slamming the bottle on the floor. **“Pay up!”** Her fingers flexed in Kaizen’s direction; he rolled his eyes before dropping two coins in her palm. **“Still got it~”** she hiccupped. Slipping backward, caught by Tama. He politely pulled her to the couch, her back against the cushions. **“Thanks, big man.”** She hummed. He took a small sip from his pink mug, it too was filled with wine, a rare pastime. He wasn’t wearing his lab coat, instead looking overly casual in a soft cotton dark grey shirt, fluffy slippers on each foot told the world he was off duty.

“It’s good right?” Ty asked, as Ethan tried his own drink, the scent, taste, feel, his senses were overloaded with warm chocolate.

He lit up, eyes sparkling. **“That is amazing!”** He exclaimed, while pointing at it in disbelief.

Kaizen watched the two, it warmed his heart, something Tama had noticed as he lightly patted his back. They shared a knowing look. Kaizen had a beer this time, something bitter with a bit of a kick, a fair few bottles set behind him, more than any one man could drink on his own, a treat he’d splurged on for once. As he lowered his glass, Ethan was given a cupcake, Ty once again telling him how it tasted before he’d even put it in his mouth. But it seemed the boy was not disappointed. More excitement followed the first bite, this set everyone else to give recommendations of their own. People forwent their own snacks in order to see how the elf reacted to the most normal of foods. Even Tama joined in, pulling new sweets from his office that he’d been testing flavours with. While trying each individual item and giving his opinions on it, he kept glancing at the hall. Specifically, to one door still left ajar.

With plates emptied, drinks gone, stomachs full and the lights had dulled, people had fallen asleep on the floor. Ty and Kimiko were in a heap, one over the other, with a foot stuffed in Ty’s face. Tama began packing up, dropping a blanket over the two. He knew better than to wake up Kimiko while she was drunk. **“I got these.”** Ethan said quietly, picking up the empty plates, he stacked a few of the mugs and glasses on top, careful not to drop anything. **“Thank you for tonight. I’ve never really...had a party before. They’re fun.”**

“Hopefully you can come for a few more.” Kaizen said cheerfully, his cheeks red, breath stunk of beer, overwhelmingly so for the other two in his company.

“...Kaizen. Bed.” Tama’s voice was cold, he stared him down while Kaizen pouted at him.

“But the party only-” he complained.

“B.E.D” Tama continued, his arm lighting up green. The dragon’s eyes widened. He shot up, swaying all the while, the number of empty bottles around him was infinitely more than anyone else. He wasn’t drunk, but a tad buzzed. He gave a quick wave before disappearing into the dark hall on the opposite side of the house.

“I’m surprised he can drink so much.” Ethan said quietly.

“He only drinks while in the company of others. He could drink more, but when he’s like that he starts trying to show people fire tricks, and I don’t want him burning my curtains.”

Ethan chuckled; the idea was amusing. **“I’ll take these to the kitchen.”** He picked up the last of their dishes, the stack now a little larger than he expected. He rested parts of it against his chest, cautious in how he balanced it.

“Did you want a hand darlin-”

“I got it.” He gave him a big grin before heading into the dark himself, small specs of blue began appearing around him, lighting up the floor. He swiftly attended to his task, popping back out to see the lights off, and the room empty, bar the two sleeping on the floor. He quietly wandered down the corridor, pausing as he reached Gabranth’s door. He hadn’t left once since coming back, not even for dinner. He glanced down, spotting the plates that’d been left for him untouched. He waited a second longer, wondering if he should check on him. Step inside, say something. Punch him. That want was slowly disappearing. Would he be here if he came back? Or would he run the moment he was gone?

He bit his lower lip, fists clenched, he turned, returning to his own room. The moment the door clicked shut his head leaned against it, sliding down until he sat on the floor. Surrounded by the mess of objects he was still in the middle of fixing. There wasn’t enough time for everything. He could finish what was in front of him, there was not a lot left after he’d done some earlier in the day, but that wasn’t what he wanted to make progress on. If they could wait another day, two... maybe he could. His hands covered his face. He couldn’t risk not being able to leave. He didn’t know if that opportunity would come back up. Kimiko had her whims and if he pissed her off, she’d leave him behind.

“...I wish he’d come with us.” He whispered. A knock hit the door, gentle, Ethan spun, scrambling to his feet, that hope climbing as he pulled the door open. The figure on the other side was tall, overly so, they towered over him, hair bunched at the top, two glowing green eyes staring him down. Ethan could feel something inside him snap; it wasn’t what he wanted. He gave a strained smile, **“What’s up?”**

Tama raised both eyebrows, clearly seeing through Ethan’s attempt at normalcy. He reached into his jacket pocket, taking out a rectangular object obscured by the shadows of the night. Ethan watched him curiously. **“I thought you might like a new one.”** He held it out, waiting for Ethan to take hold.

As his fingers met the leather journal the boy’s eyes lit up, his fingers brushed against an intricate design, much more elaborate than his previous book. His eyes stung, he gripped it tight, happy to be hiding in the dark. **“Thank you.”** He said quietly. Tama inched forward, very gently pulling Ethan close. It was warm, soft, his large frame gave so much comfort, Ethan buried his face in his chest, lightly hugging him back.

“You’re welcome sweetie.” Ethan could feel the vibration of his words through the hug, he smiled without thinking, those bitter thoughts a little lighter. **“Have a good night darling. If you need anything, I’m down the hall.”** He very softly let him go.

“Mm” Ethan nodded lightly, watching Tama disappear again. He held his book close, the smile still there as he closed the door again.

“You ready to go?” Kimiko leaned against the doorframe, both hands busy tying her hair with a new thin band. It was hand woven in stretchy threads of green and blue, it looked nice in her hair when bathed in the light of the sun. She had on her favourite travel clothes, a yellow turtleneck, gloves that came up to her shoulders, split skirt that matched the colour of her hair.

Ethan sat on his bed; a small pile of fixed items left to the side of him. His bag sat on the bed, stuffed as full as it could get. His cloak laid out beside it along with his necklace. **“Yeah. I’ll be out in a minute.”**

“Okay~ I’ll be outside.” She skipped out the door, oddly chipper. He pulled his shoes close, happy to have her out of his way for a few minutes. His journal sat against his leg, a lighter brown than his previous one, the cover was indented with many beautiful curved lines. A few sketched pages already underway, a happy reminder of his time here. He slipped his foot into one shoe, loosely tying his laces. He was slower than usual, intentionally buying himself more time. Both shoes went on, tied, his cloak draped over his shoulders, brooch clipped, necklace on, bag in hand, he paused. That was it, all he had to do now was leave. It felt bitter sweet. He glanced at his bag, stuffing the book into the little space he could.

“H-hey.”

His eyes widened, head shot upright, there he was, standing in the doorframe with that awkward smile. So uncomfortable yet trying to make an effort. His tired eyes were gone, looking oddly well rested compared to the last few days. He was a tad scruffy, as though he’d gotten up in a hurry. **“I uh...heard you were heading out.”**

“Oh... yeah.” The tension was palpable, but Ethan struggled to hide his joy.

“I see. I’m glad, you’re... back on your feet.” His tone was shaky, stopping between words randomly as though he kept tripping midway through the sentence.

“Yeaah” Ethan agreed with him, he wasn’t sure what to say either, but he appreciated the strange attempt at comfort. **“I heard you were going to stick around for a while”**

“Kaizen said I could stay. Apparently, I’ll be busy.” He had brightened up while talking, becoming clearer, a tad more confident.

“I’m glad.” Ethan whispered. Gabranth’s eyes widened, he’d heard him, and Ethan was now aware. His cheeks reddened slightly, swiftly standing, he threw the bag over his shoulder, trying to hide his face. **“I should probably go.”** He moved forward, stepping past the man, though his pace slowed.

“Wait- Uh. I wanted to give you-” the man struggled to pull something out of his pocket, fumbling about as though whatever it was got caught on his trousers. He seemed to panic for a moment, causing a slight chuckle from the other party. **“This. I wanted to give you this.”** The sound of chains hit Ethan’s ears

before he saw it, a round silver pocket watch. Carefully looked after. There wasn't a scratch on it. In its centre was the same design as the tattoo on his shoulder. **"If you're going to Lumire, this will help you should you get in a tight spot. Just make sure it's visible."**

Ethan tentatively took it from him, looking it over, he'd seen something like this once before, but never this pristine. **"I'll do that."** He spoke while distracted, flipping the object over in his hand.

"...Please. Be careful." Gabranth started, his foot lightly tapping on the ground, posture constantly changing as he tried to convey himself despite being overly nervous. **"I know I don't have the right to-"**

Ethan raised a hand, giving him a small smile as he put the item in his pocket. **"You worry. It's fine. We'll be careful."** His smile turned into that sinister grin Kimiko threw at him so often. **"Besides, I owe you a punch."** He teased, his fist raised to showcase his point.

"I was...hoping you'd forgotten about that." Gabranth chuckled apprehensively, his hand rubbing the back of his head, though he seemed a lot less tense than he had been.

"Nope! You can expect it next time we meet." Ethan spun on his heel, taking a few steps further down the hall. He paused, the warmth of the sun soothing on his skin. He smiled wide, turning back to see his father one more time. **"Thanks.... dad."** he couldn't see Gabranth's reaction, choosing to take that moment to head off. He wanted this feeling to be the last one he remembered. He briskly took off, leaving his father standing in a lonely hallway, his eyes wide, mouth agape. It was as though he hadn't realized what happened, but as Ethan went out of view, his smile reached his eyes.

The sun hung high, fighting for attention behind the clouds floating overhead. There was no wind, no rustle in the trees, leaving a strangely stale air. The path leading away from the house was well lit, standing at the start of it, away from the house was Kimiko. Kaizen and Tama stood at her side, having some kind of discussion until she took notice of him approaching. **"There you are. I was about to send out a search party for ya, you take sooooo lonnnng"** she groaned, head back, body leaning on one leg while her arms dangled.

"All I did was put on my shoes, I was barely five minutes."

"Five minutes to put on shoes is a long-time dummy." She teased, her finger flicked his forehead, spurring an annoyed look on his end.

"Uh huh, sure." He rolled his eyes.

"So, you two are off huh?" Kaizen's tone was solemn, his demeanor a little sad. Body slumped.

The duo agreed as a pair, their cheerful mood picking up Kaizen's as well. **"We shall see you guys later~"** Kimiko gave a snarky grin while she spun on her heel, starting to walk.

Ethan lightly bowed his head, smiling at the two. **"Thank you, for everything. I won't forget it."**

"Come back soon. We'll be here." Kaizen gave him a little nudge, as Kimiko edged a bit further away, though her pace was slow. **"Don't come back injured."** Tama interjected, while side-eying the dragon beside him. **"I have enough on my hands as it is."**

“No worries on that big guy, I’ll take care of him!” Kimiko called out from further up the path, a smug look on her face that concerned the remaining three.

“I’ll make sure we come back in one piece.” Ethan whispered.

“UGHHHH You’re so sloooow!” Kimiko’s voice carried again, Ethan turned around,

“I’ll see you guys later-” his sentence was cut short, he hadn’t seen their waves, or heard their goodbyes, the only thing in focus was Gabranth, barely visible, standing at the front door. He politely waved, that awkward smile on his face. Ethan’s smile felt wide enough to hit his ears, he put his hand up as he chased after Kimiko.

“You seem happy.”

“Mm... it’s good to be back on the road.” He readjusted their bag, once again being the only one to carry things.

She had her hands behind her head, relaxed and unbothered by the problems of the world. **“Yeah, I was getting bored. A change of scenery will be nice.”**

Ethan took in the quiet sound of their steps; the birds nestled in the trees nearby. The smell of various pollens from flowers that were slowly fading away with the changing season. Kimiko walked in front of him, not by much, but she always liked to be in the lead, he noticed it more since they’d had a break. She’d been looking out for him in her own way. He anticipated their next location, the anxiety looming over the idea they’d need to cross a more dangerous border than the one he’d seen a year prior. But even if they did that, another problem hit him. Lumire was a human city, way stricter than some of the ones they’d been too. Walking in was not an option. **“By the way, how are we getting into Lumire?”**

“We’ll stop off at Zene’s place first. He’s got some supplies for me.” Her hands fell behind her, fingers interwoven as she leaned her body forward, each step a little looser, that smug attitude so blatant that Ethan knew what she was up to.

“...You’re not just going to mooch off him again, are you?” She paused mid-step, giving him a clear answer. He glared at her, she winked back, her fists clenched as her pace increased, long strides that soon turned into a run.

“Let’s pick up the pace!”

“Hey!”

As the pair disappeared from sight, Kaizen let out a yawn, he was sure he had another day of relaxation before Brom turned up and threw more work his way, and he was going to enjoy it by lounging about. Tama followed after him, pausing as he noticed Gabranth standing in the doorway. **“You saw him off.”** The mass of muscles looked at them both, awkwardly shuffling out of the way as they came inside. **“Good for you.”** Kaizen grinned.

“Mm. I hope he’ll be okay.”

“He’ll be fine. Kimiko has been looking after him most of their journey. She won’t admit it, but she likes him a lot.”

“...I’m glad he has friends.” He followed the two inside, everyone splitting their separate ways for a quiet day.

As Gabranth passed by the now empty room, something caught his eye. He peered inside, everything was tidy, bed was made, the few things Ethan had fixed were in an organised pile, and settled close to the pillow was Ethan’s battered journal, loose pages sticking out in parts, with the cover lightly bent. He picked it up, nervously glancing at a note wedged in the top of the pages. *You can read it if you want to.*

Ethan's handwriting had a clear influence of someone Gabranth had known for a long time. It was neat, much like the sketches he remembered seeing the first time he opened that book. With a bit of hesitation, he sat down on the bed, the image of a boy so angry with him flashing through his mind. It switched to that smile, the word dad giving him a hint of joy as he carefully flipped the cover open.