

The woman in silver looked at the woman in brown. *I was wrong, wasn't I?*

The kid hadn't had the strength after all. She'd barely made the cut. The woman in silver should've erred on the side of caution. On the side of mercy.

Sometimes she wondered if what she did was right. She always made sure to push these thoughts away fast, though. She did what she had to do, nothing more and nothing less. She protected her people, her world, her kingdom.

Now, the woman in brown was lying amidst fallen leaves as if asleep, in truth deeply unconscious and near death. *My chosen sleeping amidst fallen leaves. It's almost poetic.* The woman in silver smiled her sad smile.

It wouldn't be long now. *One more life of solitude, spent in the name of my people. Her people.*

Divinely-keen eyes picked out the tiniest movements, watching the woman in brown's pulse falter. *Soon, child. Soon it'll be over, and nothing will ever hurt you again.*

The little pouch lay in the hand of the woman in brown, embroidered with its rune that might have been a bird, or a star, or a bleeding wound. *Ymir. The peace rune. The cycle's ending. A soundly sleeping child. A merciful slash to a sufferer's throat. Winter. Phoenixes.*

The woman in brown drew her last breath, released it, and her heart stopped.

The woman in silver descended, invisible, from the sky, and scooped up the woman in brown. The body phased through her arms, but she lifted a phantasmal copy, the dead woman's spirit.

The woman in silver smiled her sad smile and carried the woman in brown into the stars.

It was a long walk to the home of the woman in silver. She walked patiently, the gliding steps of a queen. For she was a queen, of a sort.

When the woman in brown began to stir and blink, struggling against the paralysis that took souls for a brief time during the transition, the woman in silver stopped to watch her awaken.

It took a few moments for the woman in brown to open her eyes. She spoke, her voice soft. "Mother?"

And the woman in silver wept quietly, holding the woman in brown tight. "Oh, my child, I'm so sorry...I should never have chosen you, you weren't strong enough..."

The woman in silver had expected anger. She'd expected, at the very least, agreement. What she hadn't expected was a hand brushing the tears from her eyes, and the woman in brown's voice reassuring her. "No, Mother. I am proud of myself. I laid down my life in service of my people, and what honor is greater than that?"

The woman in silver managed a smile at that. "I'm proud of you too." She began to walk through the void as easily as on solid ground, and she thought to herself about what had come to pass. The woman in brown's life had passed by, and ended alone. Her childhood had been cut short and stricken with suffering, so that her peers need not suffer. Name stripped away so she could not glorify herself, womb scoured barren to circumvent its accompanying distractions and messes, mind systematically broken to mold her into a being who was not an individual. Trained to wander the roads alone until she died. Even in death, there was little solace there below on the mortal coil. Her spirit would be well taken care of, but she would have no funeral. Her body would remain in the leaves, with no tears to anoint it. What was not taken by the worms and the ravens would crumble to dust unmourned.

This was the price of utopia, the woman in silver mused. Loneliness for one child in every five or ten score. Harsh adolescence, the surrender of name and self. And sometimes, the price of utopia was a peace pouch, and ten leaves of foxglove.

The woman in silver knew this was what was necessary. The making of her servants was harsh by necessity - look what had happened the last time the teachers were soft on them! Only non-individuals could be truly impartial, as her prophets must be.

Still, she couldn't quite shake the feeling that she was doing something wrong. She sighed, shook her head to clear away the unbidden thoughts, smiled her sad smile, and kept walking.