

Trigger Warnings: None that I know of besides child endangerment,, but please alert me if there is anything you feel should be noted.

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Seconds passed as the group lingered in the dark. Hushed murmurs scattered around them as people began to turn to each other with concerned glances. The dark didn't worry Moss, but the nervous energy building in those around them was putting him on edge. Someone's dog was growling up a storm somewhere on the other side of the group, and some of those who appeared more attuned with whatever magic nonsense affecting the place were moving back, away from where the spiritual entity had vanished. Lyra shifted beside him, crouching low and letting out her own low growl that was slowly growing in intensity.

Before Moss could ask what she was sensing, movement caught his attention and sent him diving into her as a black mass lurched towards them. Like a tendril of shadows, the mass struck out and grabbed someone who had been standing close to them. The bystander could only let out a surprised shout before they were dragged down into the floor, as though the surface were a black pool of very still water.

The room erupted into chaos as more tendrils lurched out from below. Individuals let out equally surprised shouts, with some fighting back against whatever was dragging some of them away. Lyra recovered from being tackled by Moss; however, she remained crouched on the floor next to him. Blind and without her nose to help distinguish friend and foe, Moss was relieved to see she was waiting for the threat to come to them. Another tendril shot towards them, the form splitting and dissipating with a slash of Moss's blade. As Moss parried another, he spotted others in the group who were similarly fending off the tentacle attacks.

And yet still, the shriek of someone caught unaware and dragged into the floor kept Moss on his toes.

As sudden as the attack came, it ended just as quickly. The last tendril he sliced sunk back into the floor and didn't return. The lights flickered back to life, illuminating the building's entrance in the same dull, cyan glow as it had prior to the entity's arrival. The room fell into stunned silence as those remaining took stock of who was left. Peering around the room, Moss sucked in a shaky breath at the sight that surrounded them.

Their numbers had been halved.

"What was that?"

Moss jumped at the sound of Lyra's voice so close to his ear. She was still crouched beside him, sitting upright as she could now scan the room for the now absent threat.

"I don't know." Moss replied, and it was the honest to Gods truth. Lyra wasn't just being cautious when she said they had never done an exorcism before. They barely interacted with

magic users in general, and those they did were often far away, locked in Moss's sight down the barrel. Dealing with magic directly was never their forte, and with how quickly things had turned almost immediately they were definitely in for a rough time.

Fucking magic bullshit.

"You okay?" Moss asked, standing up and sheathing Dawn Breaker.

Lyra nodded, standing up as well. There was a pinch in her brow and her ears flicked nervously as she scanned the room. Moss followed her gaze, spotting others clambering to their feet and scanning the room for further danger. The anxious energy he was feeling earlier still lingering and making him tighten his grip on Dawn Breaker's hilt.

"Did you just lead us into a trap?!"

Before Moss could try and get Lyra to move to the perimeter of the crowd and away from this nervous energy, someone shouted from the center of the group. Moss' head snapped up as he watched some of the remaining members of the group begin to converge on Cain with fists and angry faces. The psychic looked visibly shaken from the ordeal, his hands up in surrender as he kept his distance from the encroaching crowd.

"You trapped us here!"

"That spirit knew you! You probably led us here on purpose!"

Cain opened his mouth to defend himself, but the group refused to let him talk. Moss watched in rapt interest as their leader grew more frustrated.

"People are dead because of you!"

Cain's expression hardened and he finally shouted out over the crowd, "We don't know that! They could be elsewhere in the terminal!"

"But we don't know if they are still alive either!"

Cain balled his hands into fists, but dropped his arms with a sigh. "Yes, but there's nothing we can do about it now." He turned his gaze to the surrounding people with a look of guilt before continuing. "I apologize for trapping you all in this situation. I know most of you will not believe me, but I had no idea this would happen. What I do know is that there is still a job to be done. I have tried everything within my capabilities to resolve this mess by myself and all of it has failed. The spirits here need to be exorcized and I cannot do it alone."

Cain peered around the group seeking any further conflict from those left. His face was determined, but his eyes flickered nervously to those nearest to him. "I know some of you will not be as inclined to help, but those that do will still be compensated greatly!"

Some of the others around seemed to ease up with that statement, and Moss couldn't help but be one of them. He would probably join in if they were trapped there while also not getting what they were owed. Though, he considered possibly seeking Cain out later to sweeten the deal. After all, he did neglect to inform them of everything related to the job.

Seeing as no one had any more complaints the psychic brightened slightly and continued on, clasping his hands together. "So long as there is no further issue, we should get started then. Afterall, we can't just sit here and wait for that entity to make our decisions for us!"

"So, what exactly are we doing, then?" a shadowy individual asked, tipping their head to the side curiously.

"The Bifrost Terminal has been a mystery for ages," Cain explained, gesturing broadly around himself. "There has been very little information given to the general public prior to the shutdown. To start, we should gather information so we have a better understanding as to what it is we are looking at. We will use this location as our base of operations."

A girl with lilac hair approached Cain and held up a notepad for him to read. He accepted it, reading it over for a second before nodding towards her with a smile. "Yes so, 'How will we be gathering information?' Well, I believe it will be best for everyone to form groups. That way no one is going off by themselves. Let's plan on meeting back close to nightfall, or at least in several hours. If you learn anything, even the most mundane of facts, please bring that information back. Once everyone has returned, we will reconvene as to how to handle the exorcism and what else needs to be done."

With that, the group began to disperse. Not everyone seemed convinced, there was more muttering and suspicious glances exchanged towards Cain, but if they had any better ideas they were not being voiced out loud. Moss was at least pleased with this plan as it went well with his own. The only issue would be finding someone who could easily take care of the ghosts.

One individual caught his attention, a man whose face seemed to be sloshing off in some red paint. Or was it blood? Either way, due to their relaxed demeanor even after what had occurred, they undoubtedly knew what they were doing.

Before he could go off and approach them however, Lyra grabbed at the edge of his cloak and stopped him.

"What are we doing Moss?" Lyra asked, eyeing the crowd around them as people went about securing their items in the supposed camp.

Moss sighed, pulling his cloak free from her grasp. "We continue as planned. I'll go find someone to group up with that knows how to exorcise ghosts. Then we just let them do their thing while we keep them safe."

"You saw what that last one did. How can we fight off that?"

"We got through that attack with no issues." Moss replied with a shrug. "Besides, it's not like we can go anywhere else now. We might as well cooperate until a different opportunity crops up."

He turned back, scouring the crowd and was disappointed to see the red-faced man was gone. *Great.* Behind he heard Lyra let out a snort as she grumbled lowly to herself. "We would be halfway down the mountain by now if we had just turned around."

"And halfway frozen to death with no food." Moss hissed, spinning around to bare his fangs at her. "Or did you forget our supplies were running low?"

"We could have made it." Lyra snapped back, standing straight and baring her own fangs in response. "But like always, you never think these things through."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

His voice was louder than he had intended, drawing curious gazes their way but he ignored them. He didn't know what was getting to her, but whatever it is was winding her up. It wasn't rare for her to try and bait him into a fight, but it was for it to occur without an outright cause. Usually, a job has to go south first, but whatever. If it was a fight she wanted, Moss was fine with burning off some excess energy. He braced himself for the coming brawl, already planning to strike at her nose the moment she moved forward.

He'd give her his rations for it later to make up for it.

Lyra squared up, her ears pinned back and tail swishing behind her in agitation as she growled. "You know what I mean."

Yeah, maybe he did. But he would never admit it.

"There you two are!"

Cain's voice snapped them both back to the present. Moss let out a sigh, stepping back and turning to face the approaching psychic. He heard Lyra grumble something but didn't catch what she said as she also straightened herself, though she was still far from relaxed as indicated by her tail continuing to swish behind her.

Cain was weaving through the remaining group; most having cleared out it seems while they were bickering. Another person trailed behind him, eyeing them curiously but kept his distance as they approached. Whether they realized that they just stopped a fight or not was unclear as both seem to ignore it.

"You don't look the type to voluntarily group up with strangers, so I took the liberty of finding you someone to work with," Cain said with a smile before gesturing for the stranger to step forward. "Val, this is who you will be working with."

The new man, Val, had dark skin and dreadlocks ending in bleached-blond tips, arranged in tidy rows along the curve of his head. He was dressed in a dark blue puff jacket that was zipped up to his chin and brown pants. Attached to his wrist was a small book on a chain, which seemed to be kept close to his hand. As he approached, he carried himself with an easy, confident air that Moss didn't trust. He offered them an easy smile as he nodded in greeting, "Val Halmore. Nice to meet your acquaintance." His hand is offered out to shake, but neither budged to accept it.

"You're an exorcist?" Moss asked instead, ignoring the hand as he glared up at him.

Val dropped his hand, looking disappointed that his greeting was ignored. With a shake of his head he responded, "I'm a Cultivatist Guide actually. I work with exile spirits to help them pass through the inner veil into the outer." When the two gave him a blank stare he coughed and clarified. "I help spirits cross over."

"You can at least help remove spirits, right?"

"Yes?" Val replied, his face scrunched at how Moss had phrased his question. "Though, we don't remove-."

"Alright, we'll work with you." Moss cut him off with a wave of his hand, satisfied with being paired with someone who seemed to have a grasp on what they were supposed to be doing here. "We'll keep you safe while you perform your stuff, and we can get out of here."

"Safe?" Val questioned, though he was mostly ignored as Cain slapped him on the back with a grin.

"Good! Glad that all worked out!" Cain said, already turning away to help another. "You can store any unnecessary gear here! Make sure you come back by nightfall so we can go over what was discovered!"

The three stood awkwardly as the psychic left. After a moment, Lyra suddenly shoved past Moss, storming off to presumably store their gear. Hopefully. Moss did his best to avoid looking at the man, chose to roll his shoulders and limber up for their coming trek through this hellhole. Though, he was slightly relieved that it was at least warmer inside the building than outside. With any luck, his leg wouldn't be as stiff from the cold.

"So, keeping me safe?" Val repeated, breaking the silence that had settled around them. "I can keep myself safe, you know."

Moss relented, not like there was anything else to do while they waited. "We're Foundry." he stated, quickly following it when Val gave a confused look. "Bounty hunters. We go out and secure any targets or jobs that the Foundry is tasked to take care of. Our current job is making sure you perform yours so we can collect our payment and get out of here. Can't do that if you get killed."

Moss caught the man looking down at his peg leg before shifting back to looking at the eyepatch on his face with a frown. "Aren't you... a bit young to be doing this? Without supervision?" Val queried, his voice carrying a concern that ticked Moss off.

The catkin scowled, crossing his arms over his chest and pulling his cloak around himself again. "We're not young!" he snapped. "I'm almost 16. Practically an adult already. And Lyra may be two years younger than me but she can rip through just about anyone if she's motivated enough."

Val's frown deepened, clearly not happy with Moss's response. Ugh. Moss angrily looked away towards the direction Lyra had wandered off in. It was bad enough to be left alone with this guy, but the last thing he wanted was this stranger's pity. He never understood why people always liked to stick their noses into other people's problems.

"I'm going to figure out what's taking her so long." Moss said, sidestepping around Val just as he was looking to ask another question, darting away into the makeshift camp.

Despite the short window to enter the terminal, the group had managed to bring quite a bit into the entrance before the door had sealed. Several boxes and bags sat at the base of the grand statue; a makeshift fire was started at the center. Cain was currently directing someone to help set up a tent with what appeared to be medical supplies to the left of it, while to the area to the right had blankets and cots set to the side of various states of readiness.

Still bare, but at least enough to qualify it as a home base, it seemed.

He found Lyra in a corner closest to the doors. The worgen was crouched over her pack, having placed it into a darker corner where the light didn't quite reach. She was currently blowing into a rag pressed up against her nose in an attempt to clear out her sinuses. Though, from how she scowled and tossed it away, it was a fruitless endeavor. Moss stopped a few paces away from her as she finished sealing up her pack. There was no reason to announce his presence, as she would have already heard his approach and was just choosing to ignore him.

"How's your nose?" he asked, even though he already knew the answer.

"Still can't smell shit," she griped. With a shove, she finished securing the pack and rested her paws on her knees. "What do you want, Moss?"

"I got tired of that guy's questions and wanted to check on you." Moss said, before awkwardly adding. "You also still seem upset and I just... I don't want to fight with you."

Lyra peered over her shoulder, regarding him for a moment before nodding slightly. "I don't want to fight either."

She stood, stretching her back before closing the distance between them. "I'm still mad at you for getting us into this mess." She growled, but there was very little anger left in her words. "But I know you are only trying to get back on Dawson's good side."

The thought of even trying to make peace with Dawson almost had him gag. “He has one of those?” he joked instead, trying to push the conversation past that.

Lyra laughed, snorting slightly when her nose chose that moment to clog with snot. She moved to walk past, but instead paused. “What if it doesn’t work out with this guy?”

“Val?” Moss pondered for a second before shrugging, “If he can’t exorcise the ghosts here, then we’ll find someone else.”

“And we’ll stick together, right?”

Moss froze at how small Lyra’s voice sounded. The slight quiver of anxiety in her tone made him reach out and grab her paw.

“Of course!” he proclaimed, leading her back towards where they left the Cultivist Guide. “You’re stuck with me forever.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

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Val wasn’t an easily shaken individual.

As a Cultivist, life should be lived fully and without regrets of one’s decisions, even in times of uncertainty. Which yes, perhaps he was feeling a bit uncertain about how events were progressing but not in the way one would assume.

The entity dragging half of them into the unknown was a surprise. He managed to dodge the tendrils that lurched his way, though it seemed they were more interested in those around him than himself. He felt remorse to those who had already fallen, hoping that they would not join those who remained on this side of the veil. However, he was also feeling eager as he walked down the corridor leading away from the entrance. He had wanted a grand challenge for his final test, and the event earlier only cemented his opinion that this was where he needed to be. This is where he would finish his fulfillment ritual.

Where he felt uncertain was with the individuals he was now paired up with.

The two in question were walking ahead of him, the wolfkin-like individual hunched low to whisper into the catkin’s ear. Lyra and Moss, though it did take a bit for him to finally get them to actually introduce themselves. He couldn’t make out what they were saying but he kept catching Lyra’s eyes lingering on him with a distrustful glare. An acknowledgement at least that he existed, whereas Moss seemed to be actively ignoring him.

When Cain had pulled him aside and casually mentioned him being put on ‘babysitting duty,’ he hadn’t realized the psychic was being literal. The two are young and seem volatile as

hell based on how they were both moments away from fighting when he was initially introduced. Young isn't a terrible thing. He's seen Cultivatists and apprenticeships start training at a young age, but to be 15 and 13 with no mentor in sight? Who just lets kids run wild on a frozen icicle of a mountain?

He's at least relieved they are not looking like they are about to gut each other. When Cain had initially introduced them to him, he was worried that he would have to put up with whatever that was about on top of everything else. But thankfully they seemed to have worked it out while storing their gear.

They did very little conversing when leaving the main entrance hall. Simply agreeing to move deeper into the building to not overlap with others. Val was beginning to pick up a very strong aversion towards others from the two, but he could understand that sentimentality. There's a lot of emotions running high right now from being trapped here and the last thing they needed was getting in a fight over who was exploring what.

Though, exploring and information gathering... How exactly are they going to go about doing that?

With a sigh, Val stops. The other two pause after a few more steps, eyeing him curiously as he peers around the surrounding hall. They've been walking for a bit now. Just like in the entrance they are surrounded by gold-shot black marble lit with similar cyan columns of light. The only real difference is the passage narrowing down. They had passed some access points that appeared to lead to several store fronts and a shady looking hotel, but they decided to keep going down the endless tunnel for something more related to the terminal.

"So, gathering information." he says, his voice causing them to stop and look at him. "We can't just keep walking aimlessly. Where should we start?"

The two share a glance before shrugging. Moss replies with a nod in his direction. "You're the caster, genius."

"You tell us," Lyra adds, "we're just here to protect you."

"I keep telling you I'm not a caster, I'm a Guide." Val mutters. With the ball seemingly permanently in his court, Val has to think for a moment about what to do next. He looks around for anything of note, continuing to find nothing of note.

Not a lot of options to start but... Oh! If one does not have information, then the next step is to find someone who does.

With a flick of his wrist he summons his dutiful tome, Ones That Passed, which flips into existence out of the smaller simulacrum in his hand. Its tagged and bookmarked pages ruffle in a smooth, unfelt breeze before Val stops it with a finger. The others are watching with a mix of fascination and wariness that he ignores as he reads the notes on the page before turning to

another. It takes several pages for his eyes to finally land on the entry he has been looking for. "Here we are."

He calls out to the darkness that descends upon them like a shadowy veil. The lights around them dimmed or snuffed out entirely in the process. His voice echoes eerily in the empty hall, before fading as an old, withered spirit with a friendly face emerges from the gloom. Its spectral gown of blacks and silvers dragging soundlessly across the stone floor as it approaches.

"It's good to see you, Val." The old spirit regards Val with a nod of the head before turning to address Moss and Lyra. "I see you have made friends."

"What the fuck is that?!"

Val turns to see Moss and Lyra standing as if they are only moments away from launching at the old spirit. Val does a double take at the very obvious rifle in Moss's hands, now pointed threateningly in their direction. Where the hell did that come from?

"It's fine! Don't worry!" Val says as quickly steps in between them, hands up to quell them. "I can summon spirits for assistance. It will not hurt us."

Even with Val's assurance neither one seems to budge. They remain transfixed on the spirit in equal parts fight and flight. Val sighs, turning back to the waiting spirit.

"Greetings, Alemayehu," Val says respectfully. "Thank you for coming."

"It has been a while since you last requested my aid." They say with a calming voice similar to a lone wind. They tilt their head as they continue, "What is your inquiry today?"

Val gestures to the strange room that vaults way up above them. "I was wondering if you could tell me something about this place."

The specter tilts its head back to gaze upon the strange, dark structure. Alemayehu scans the room before their eyes transfix upon a single point on the wall. They drift away from Val towards that point, casually phasing right through Moss -- who shivers and almost drops his rifle -- to get to them. It approaches the wall, gliding a hand along its surface as they observe the sleek, black marble. Their face tightens with concern the longer they examine it, their gaze lifting to one of the dim lights that flickered overhead. "This is truly troubling."

"What is?" Val asks, approaching the spirit.

"I am unfamiliar with this specific architecture. The energy flowing through the lighting appears to be in a suspended state."

"Meaning?"

"It vibrates between two moments in time: the past, and in the present. Some powerful magic keeps it locked in a time loop in order to keep it oscillating, which powers this place indefinitely. However, this means that the magic here is stagnant as well-- whatever happens here is not permanent. It will revert the moment the spell here is broken."

Val is clearly confused. "Do you know how this happened?"

"There are many reasons why this may occur, though I know not as to why this specific spell has been cast. You will need to ask the caster for that information." Alemayehu states, their hand continuing to drift along the wall as they follow it deeper. Val and the others carefully follow after, keeping pace with the slow-moving spirit.

"How are we unaffected?" Val inquires.

"You were not here for the initial event that froze this place in time. It is not a field that affects anyone who walks through."

"So if we break the mechanism that keeps this entire place suspended in time, we can free the spirits?" Lyra asks, speaking up from where she stands behind Moss. Her fur is no longer standing on end, but she is being careful on keeping Moss between herself and Alemayehu.

Alemayehu shakes his head slightly, "No. The spirits I sense here are not trapped by this spell alone. There is something else happening here."

Alemayehu stops short at one of the light columns. Their hand lightly strokes the base of the fixture. "It is odd, but the energy flowing through the walls feels fairly crude in comparison to the rest of the structure."

"What do you mean?" Val asks, creeping up to stare at the fixture alongside the spirit.

"This type of energy usually needs to be refined before being processed by magical devices. But this... this feels raw, like water straight from the source. It contains impurities. This place must be deriving its power from a natural source. It's... inadvisable. Unethical. Highly unstable."

Val doesn't like the sound of that. "Perhaps we'll find out what this source is. It's likely tied in with this... suspension problem."

Alemayehu smiles and nods. "You have learned so much, my dear Val."

Val bows to the ghost. "Thank you, wise Alemayehu."

With that, Val dismisses the spirit, and Alemayehu departs peacefully.

"So the spirits are linked with the building's power source?" Lyra queried with a tilt of her head. "Then we just need to shut off the power."

Val crossed his arms over his chest in thought. "I don't think it's that simple. The suspension is most likely more in relation to the source of power feeding into the structure, which in turn may be why there are spirits here. But we don't even know if we can shut off the power flow or redirect it."

"Well, let's go find it then." Moss said with a huff. With a flick of his wrist and a flourish of golden light, the rifle shrunk and shifted into a small dagger which the catkin quickly sheathed under his cloak. Taking the lead again, Moss continued down the corridor with Val and Lyra tailing behind.

They walked a ways more before they finally reached the end. Val was seriously considering that they were trapped in some infinite hallway when the space suddenly opened up to a massive circular room. Several shuttered businesses or facilities seem to have once made a home of this central space, many more extending into the additional 3 corridors that bisect the building. A large domed ceiling towers above them, supported by several black and gold columns that neatly encircle a gated area in the center of the room. Above, a massive light piece composed of many sparkling shards of crystal dances in the air. The silver and cyan light it sheds is more than the fixtures in the entrance, offering some comfort in this bleak structure.

Val approached the gate leaving the others to gawk at the swirling light above them. He smiled slightly at Lyra's attempt to grab one of the lower shards only for it to skitter out of reach. As he neared, he realized the center of the room was an empty pit, surrounded by an intricate rail that twisted and curled into the large gate. A shake of the gate revealed that it was stuck fast, offering hardly any give and most likely shut with magic. He peered down into the hole, but there was nothing but vacant darkness below them.

"What's with the hole?" Moss spoke up, joining Val but clambering up onto the rail to peer over its edge.

"Don't know. Probably an elevator or something, but the platform isn't at this level." Val responded, trying to ignore the teen balancing precariously on the edge of an open pit as he surveyed the rest of the room. Following the rail, he finds a winding staircase leading down. Its path follows the edge of the pit however the light from above does little to illuminate how far down the stairs go.

"Should we continue exploring this floor, or see where this leads?" Val asks, turning back to the others. Moss remains transfixed on staring into the abyss below, but Lyra has now joined him though is still more interested in the lights above.

"We should head down." Moss said, still remaining on the edge.

"Why? We can always come back?"

"If we are looking for the source of what powers this place, it would make more sense that it would be deeper down." Moss replied. "This whole area is too public and pristine for something like a generator or energy source."

“Less people around too.” Lyra says plainly, ears flicking back and forward as she cocks her head to the side. “I can hear others already investigating the other corridors.”

“Alright, down we go.” Val looks back towards the stairs and cringes at how dark the steps look. Deciding that things would be easier with a bit of light, he pulls out *Ones That Passed*, skimming through the pages before stopping on another green tabbed page. A simple spirit to help guide them through a dark place is just what they need.

He lifts his head to announce his plan before accidentally startling them again when he catches Lyra’s mischievous smirk. Before he can say anything, she gives Moss a bit of a shove, as if to casually tip him over the edge into the yawning drop below. The catkin lets out a surprised yelp, his arms flailing as he loses his balance. In an attempt to right himself, he latches onto the nearest object for support.

Lyra’s ear.

The Worgan yelps herself, jolting back and pulling Moss away from the edge and onto the safety of the floor. Val can’t help the small chuckle as he watches the entire event play out, with Moss snapping up at her from the heap he has become on the floor, though there is very little heat to his words as he yells at her. “You almost killed me!”

“I wanted to see if you would land on your feet.” Lyra teases, sticking her tongue out. “But it seems you can only land on your-.”

Her words are cut off by a swift kick to the shin.

With a sigh, Val draws out a pen and pad of paper from his coat. With practiced ease he writes out the necessary enchantment and rips the page from the pad which he swiftly returns to its proper place. “This will help us see the way while we head to the lower levels.” He explains as folds the page in half. With a flick of his wrist, the page ignites, the paper ripping itself into floating embers that hover around them.

Witches Light, a term often given to minor spirits who offer guiding light. They are curious in nature and fairly harmless in comparison to the other summons within the tome.

Moss and Lyra watch the scattered paper as they move with Val. The latter watching with rapt fascination as some float close enough to touch.

“I wouldn’t touch them.” Val says when she extends out a finger to prod it, “They don’t do more than illuminate surroundings, but they can still burn you if you’re not careful.”

Lyra frowns and withdraws her hand, but she continues to watch them with great interest as they proceed down the stairs. Moss takes the lead, placing Lyra in between them as he keeps to the edge of the light. Val carefully follows after. The black marble used on the stairs is highlighted by some gold trim to help distinguish the steps, but the lighting makes the descent feel more sinister than it actually is.

“Hey Lyra.” Moss’s voice suddenly rings out among their steps. Val looks up, seeing that the two have now fallen within the same pace of steps. There’s mischief in their eyes that makes Val groan as Moss leans over to his Worgan companion. “Bet I could beat you to the bottom.”

In a flash both are suddenly racing down the steps. Val curses and picks up his pace, trying to keep his footing as he tries to keep up with the two despite quickly falling behind. In the light cast by his Witches Light, he sees Lyra slip and tumble a few steps, nearly taking out Moss who barely manages to jump to the side. Both are laughing as they continue on into the darkness, not caring about what exactly is ahead of them or who they are leaving behind.

He can feel the spirit laughing along with them as they float around him and Val’s shoulders slump in defeat as he continues down alone. Though he does crack a slight smile at the sound of their laughter echoing around him.

Kids.

It takes roughly forty minutes to reach the bottom of the stairs. Val’s legs feel weak from the descent and he begins to second guess not stopping at one of the floors above. The pit that the stairs had been circling continues further down, alluding to this possibly not being the lowest point they can reach in this structure, but they are halted by another gate impeding their path at this floor.

Just how large is this place?

Another massive room lays out before him. This one is wider than the previous, but with a lower ceiling and thicker columns designed to hold the weight of the building itself. For the most part, the space is just open space. The only noticeable feature being the fencing branching from the gate and bisecting the room. Moss and Lyra are leaning against it, peering into the other side and whispering to themselves.

“Took you long enough.” Moss griped as he lazily leaned away from the fencing.

“I’m too old to blindly run down stairs.” Val said, dismissing the Witches Light and approaching the fence himself.

“Yeah, old people are pretty fragile.” Moss agreed though Val refused to give a response to that statement. The area beyond the fence was darker than the side they were on but he could just make out various counters and machines proceeding several tunnels.

“I think we found the entrance to the terminals.” Val said, stepping back to fully observe the fence blocking them. Just like the gates at the pit, the fencing is intricate in detail, but barely budging. It stretches from floor to ceiling, wall to wall, completely cutting off that part of the room from them with no visible access point that he can see. This isn’t a dead end. Two corridors branch off from this side, both spanning in opposite directions and seem to have several important signs plastered around them though he is unable to read them from here. “We can’t continue down, but we can at least explore this area first before heading back.”

“Hello!”

All three whip around in shock at the woman staring at them from beyond a counter. She’s dressed in a fine fitting uniform with long sleeves, cyan in color and only slightly bluer than her complexion. The short scarf tied around her neck is more for fashion than for warmth, same with the small flat hat on top of her head. Black hair frames her face and she looks at them with an unnaturally wide smile. At a glance, one would assume she was relatively normal, except for the dead, unfocused eyes that stare at them.

A spirit.

Val waves the other two to stand down as he steps up. Moss re-sheathes his blade and Lyra lets out a huff, but seems fine with him addressing this spirit.

“You three seem lost. Do you require assistance?” The spirit asks in a friendly tone.

“Yes actually.” Val says, giving them his own smile. “Well. I guess we are looking for a.. power room? Or a maintenance area?”

“Oh yes! The Bifrost Terminal is the transportation hub for the Rainbow Bridge sector. To the west of this hall you will find the cargo transportation docks as well as mail service and customs offices. To the east are customs for those who are conducting interworld-.”

“Wait, hold on!” Val jumps, waving his hands to try and get her to slow down as she rambles. “Thank you but we only need to know where the main source of power is for the building!”

The woman stops and continues to stare unblinkingly at him before responding, “I’m sorry sir, but the power station for the Bifrost Terminal is not in this sector.”

“Oh, okay.” Val says with a sigh. “Can you tell us where it is then? We were sent to investigate.. this?” To emphasize, Val gestures at the gloom and darkness that surrounded them.

Instead of responding the spirit’s unfocused gaze remains fixed on Val. His brow pinches as he watches her still form, trying to resist the urge to wave a hand in her face. “Uhm, hello? Are you okay-.”

“Yes hello!” She seemingly pops back to reality, friendly smile back in place as she regards him with her dead eyes.

“Hi?” Val greets back in confusion. He turns to the others but they look equally confused at how this conversation is going. When he looks back the spirit is plucking away at the console in front of her, though the device is dead and unresponsive to the motions. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, I’m fantastic, thank you for asking!”

Val gives her a concerned look as the spirit cheerily stares back without a care in the world. He clears his throat and pushes through the building awkwardness. "The Terminal's been in... terminal lockdown for years," he tries to explain to her. "Do you know what happened here?"

"So sweet to see young families traveling together," the spirit says listlessly instead, her dead gaze lowering to the monitor. "I always wanted to travel with my husband but he doesn't see the appeal of it. Do you need assistance scheduling a warp or general departure?"

"That's not what I asked..." Val sighed, growing frustrated with the conversation. "Are you aware that you are dead?"

"I hear prices have dropped for warps to Elais. A real deal for those wanting to travel."

"No, I don't want to travel." Val groaned, dragging a hand over his face. This was getting them nowhere, maybe he would have to change tactics? Would another spirit help?

"This is a waste of time." Moss grumbled from behind. "Why don't you just exercise her and move on? She's clearly out of her mind."

Val shot the catkin a glare as the spirit continued to list off names of destinations and rates, her voice droning on in the background. "You can't rush these things." He stated in a clipped voice, "I have to get her to open up first before we move on to helping her pass on. I can't do that if she isn't even aware that she is dead."

Moss looked like he was going to complain further when Lyra suddenly stepped past him and spoke up, "What about Marshal? In Faedire?"

Moss's expression darkened immensely as he elbowed her in the ribs, but the Wolfkin ignored him as she waited for the clerk to respond. The clerk tapped at the blank screen before turning her attention to Lyra. "I can't find anywhere named Marshal, but I do see a warp set for Faedire."

"Moss-!"

"We can't even access the terminals, why are we bothering with this?" Moss growled, ignoring Lyra as he turned to Val. "We have a job to do, and entertaining some confused spirit isn't part of it."

"It's not your job but it is mine." Val argued.

"Then you can keep at it." Moss spat, "I'm going to check the corridors for any real information we can use." With a huff, the catkin spun and stalked towards the east corridor. Lyra gave the clerk a determined look briefly before turning to chase after Moss, leaving Val alone.

Weren't they supposed to be his 'protection?' he thought to himself as he turned back to the clerk. "Sorry about that," he said. "They have terrible manners-."

The desk was empty. The spirit vanished without a trace, leaving the desk as dark as it had been when they had arrived on this floor. Val peers around, glancing behind the desk for anything of use, but other than a few pamphlets about various schedules and services there is nothing of note. With an annoyed huff, he grabs some of the pamphlets and stuffs them into his pocket before chasing after Moss and Lyra.

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As Moss walked the corridor, he could still feel frustration simmering beneath his skin. They had wasted so much time there, and for what? To talk to some spirit who seemed more caught up in her own job than what was happening around her? To prove that the person they teamed up with lacked any initiative to actually do the job they were brought in to do?

To learn that there's some warp that leads back to Marshal?

He had considered it, that a terminal of this size would have more than a few local destinations amongst the grander ones. But to hear of the possibility of being sent back so soon made him sick. The only good thing was that the terminals were still sealed off, though who knows how long that will last while the others are doing who knows what to restore this place.

Moss made it a good several meters down the corridor before Lyra trotted up to join him. He glared at her when she intentionally bumped into him but she ignored it, choosing instead to silently keep pace with him. He huffed and pulled his cloak tighter around him, reminding himself not to be upset with her. She doesn't see the issue about going back, and it's not like he's had time to talk to her about his plan to flee the Foundry the moment his collar is off. He considers broaching the topic now, but the sound of additional footsteps keeps him quiet.

When they get back to Cain's basecamp they'll talk.

Val falls into step beside them, huffing and puffing from having to run. "You two shouldn't just run off like that, you'll get yourselves lost!" The Guide scolds, but Moss just levels an impassive stare in their direction. He goes to mock his lack of physical ability, but is interrupted by Lyra.

"What are those?" She inquires, pointing a sharp claw at the pamphlets clutched in Val's hands.

"The information desk had a few pamphlets." Val said, fanning them out so they both could see, the group stopping and peering down at the colorful pieces of paper. "Since the spirit left the moment you both ran off, this was the only other thing I could get from them. Though I did manage to snag a map!"

"A map? Why didn't you say so?" The Worgan tries to grab one of the folded papers from Val's hand, but it's swiftly snatched back.

"No way," Val said, "First, I need to know what the hell that was all about."

"It's none of your business." Moss spits.

"It is if it's going to compromise our team." Val sighs, his expression softening into concern. "I'm just concerned about you both."

Oh, no. Fuck this.

Tired, and wanting to just get this little adventure over with, Moss decided to strike out. With lightning speed, he snagged one of the pamphlets and ripped it from Val's grasp. Prize in hand, he spun around and resumed walking down the corridor as he unfurled the paper. His brow furrowed as he tried to find where they were on the crude map.

"Hey, hold on!" A hand grabbed Moss's arm and suddenly he wasn't in the frozen hell hole. He was being pulled to a different hell. With a snarl, Dawn Breaker was drawn and he slashed at the offending limb. Holding his weapon defiantly in front of him as he prepared for another attack.

"Ow, what the fuck!" Val hissed as he backed away. He grabbed his wrist as though it might fall off, holding it low with his elbow tucked closed to his body. The blood that wasn't immediately soaked up by the hole in his sleeve slid down to his wrist instead, pooling around his tightly gripped fingers. "You cut me!"

"Don't touch me," Moss warned him, brandishing his knife with his ears pinned back. Val stepped back again, his expression a mix of pain and frustration. Lyra watched them both with rapt attention, her eyes drifting from Moss to Val.

"You're both insane," Val seethed through his teeth. "Seriously, what is wrong with the both of you?!"

"The fuck is wrong with *you*?" Lyra retorted, taking a step towards him.

Val immediately backed off as the Worgan began to size him up. "I am trying to WORK with you!" he snapped. "But I can't do so if you're both going to be all over the place like this! I'd appreciate it if you'd just let me --"

Suddenly a cacophony of noise snapped all three out of their argument and into defensive stances. Lyra shifted her attention towards the noise, positioning herself in front of them, crouching low to not impede the other's line of sight. Moss readied Dawn Breaker, the knife now a rifle gripped tight in his left hand while his right retrieved a bullet from his pouch. Val fell into his own stance, book ready and pages already opened to a page with a red tab.

They didn't have to wait long for the source of the sound to come crashing through a pair of double doors and into the hall. It was.... a man, dressed in a blue dress shirt, blue slacks, and black tie. Sheer panic was written over his face, the large square glasses on his nose causing his wide eyes to appear comically over large as he frantically sprinted towards them.

Who the fuck was this guy?? Moss stared in disbelief as the man, whose wild eyes continually roved the perimeter in search of something, came running right towards them, absolutely heedless of what was in front of him. Just as he was about to pass, Lyra stood and stuck an arm out. The man ran full bore into her outstretched forearm and bounced his face off of it, falling back with a rumpled thud to the floor.

With how he is continuously looking behind himself and how wild his eyes rove the perimeter as if searching for something he either has not noticed them, or is too freaked out from whatever he was fleeing to care about their presence. As he comes within distance of them, Lyra stands up to her full height, extends her left arm, and close lines the man into a dead stop.

Moss exchanged a look with Val, but the Librarian only offered a shrug as they moved to surround the writhing man on the floor. The poor fellow wheezed, clutching at his chest as tears sprang to his eyes. Lyra has placed a hand on his chest, effectively pinning him to the ground with little to no effort on her part.

"Y-ou Assholes! Let me go!" he gasped, glaring up at the trio.

Lyra leaned down at him, lips peeled back, baring her fangs inches from the man's face, and causing him to snap his mouth shut in a whimper.

"Why?" she growled. Moss has to stop himself from rolling his eyes as she intentionally let a string of drool drip onto the man's glasses. The scare tactic worked, causing him to flinch back in disgust.

"Okay enough!" Val says as he steps in, leaning into the man's line of sight. "We're not here to hurt you, we just want to help." He looked to Lyra with a pleading expression and she relented with a huff, though she remained crouched and ready to spring should the man do anything.

The man cautiously sat up and scooted back away from her. Once he was out of arm's reach, he warily watched her as he removed his glasses and wiped them clean. When he returned the glasses to his face, Val continued.

"Now, then-- who are you, and what was that all about? I don't remember seeing you with Cain's group."

"Group?" The man stared back at him blankly for a moment. "No, I'm not with a group. Would have been nice if they sent me with some more personnel so I wouldn't have to be stuck in this haunted fucking place by myself--"

His gaze darted between the three of them. "Wait," he suddenly said, scowling. "Did you say Cain? As in, Cain Salvatori?"

The man looked at the three for confirmation, though Val was the only one who gave him a nod in confirmation.

"Blazing hells, it took him long enough! I've been trying to find him for the past... week? Whatever-- where is he?!"

The man staggered to his feet, glaring at Lyra who returned it with a toothy grin that made him take several hasty steps away. With a shaky breath he straightened his tie and turned to face them, still trying to suss out who between the three was actually in charge. His expression shifted from cautious to alert before ending in confusion as he finally took in their general appearances.

"You're not Titan employees. Who are you? What are you doing here, this site is closed to the public."

"We're here to exorcise the spirits," Moss said flatly, annoyed by the stranger's attitude. "Obviously you lot from Titan haven't been doing a good enough job."

Glasses man sputtered indignantly, but stopped when Lyra took the opportunity to stand up. Even though the man was tall, Lyra was still several inches taller, her ears standing straight up to give her an additional few inches to loom over him.

"Cain brought us in!" Val said, quickly jumping in to break up the mounting tension between the group. "He needed help removing the spirits here and we are part of the group that responded."

Still wary of Lyra, the man tugged the lapels of his jacket straight again, doing his best to look less rumpled. "Fine," he said, "it is what it is and frankly I don't care if this is the help we are dealing with. My name's Simon Martin-Edwards, I'm an Asset and Contractor Relations Liaison with Titan. I need to meet with Cain and discuss the situation as things are far worse than we had been informed and I can't--"

A horrible metallic shriek ripped through the air, startling the group. The man, Simon, whirled around to face the direction he came from, while backing away from the source. "Ssshit, w-we need to go!" he stammered, moving to flee again, but was blocked by Lyra and Moss.

Moss was about to demand what had him so worked up, and what he had undoubtedly led onto them, when the sound of mechanical screeching cut him off. The noise reverberated down the empty hall, causing an earsplitting echo that caused both teens to flinch back. With Moss thrown off by the sound and Lyra covering her ears and squeezing her eyes shut in pain, Simon took the opportunity to bolt. Moss made a grab for him, but was easily dodged as the man sprinted down the hall in a panic.

The doors that Simon had come from slammed open again, and a hulking mechanical mass heaved itself through. Silver with cyan and gold stripes decorating its sides and arms, the machine stood at least three feet higher than Lyra. Its appearance reminded Moss of a spider, with its six long, spindly legs extending from a bulbous, spherical body. In the front, another component was mounted with two disc-like apparatus mounted on either side. Connected to this by a narrow, slender neck was a short flat head which snapped to their direction immediately upon clearing the door. Its head bobbed at the three with its gleaming lenses. Each leg was tipped with a wheel, which one would assume would roll smoothly across the tiled floor of the Terminal. However, as it attempted to roll towards them, the legs on the right side locked up causing it to remain at a tilted angle. The functional legs struggled to pull the body in a straight path, but its malfunctioning legs screeched horribly as they dragged awkwardly across the tile. The busted legs convulsed as it tried to engage. The head itself sparked and twitched, the cyan lights along its chassis pulsing with each spark.

The machine came to a stop several yards away, the head reaching its full height before a tinny, warbly voice drawled out from it. "Bio..etrIC SCANS FaiLED. ..eASE PReseNT EMpl..YEE IDenTI..ION."

The three on the floor exchange looks, confused as to what to do. Val was the first to recover, stepping forward to address the machine.

"Stop and desist!" Val called out. "We are civilians!" Moss rolled his eye at the man's incessant need to calm everything.

"PLEas.. PreSENT EmpLOYEEcATION." The machine ignored Val, stepping forward with its good leg while its head continued to bob and weave. The motion had both Lyra and Moss snap to attention. The Worgan stepped to Val's left while Moss flanked his right, flashing her a sign which she responded with a slight nod.

Point forward. *Follow your lead.*

"We are not employees," Val said firmly. "We are visitors to the terminal!"

The machine fell silent, its head bobbing up and down as it looked Val over.

"TRe..sSPa..ERS DEteCTED. In...ATInG CaPT... pROTOCOL."

Lyra was the first to react, shooting past Val as she launched herself at the sentry right as a mechanical arm shot out from the mounted disks. Like a coiled snake, the arm had a far greater reach than any of them had expected. The metal claws on the end snapped wildly inches from Val's face as Lyra fought to keep hold of it.

Moss pushed Val back behind him, leveling his rifle at the machine as it tried to retract the arm out of her grasp. "Hang tight," he told him as he snapped his rifle up to get a bead on the head. The head however was constantly being blocked by legs as it shifted back to break Lyra's grasp. With an irritated growl, Moss switched targets.

"I'm not useless," Val insisted as he whipped his book out again. "Keep it distracted. I'll take care of this."

"You better have some kind of magic that works on machines," Moss muttered as he trained his sight on the monster bot's first leg joint. He counted under his breath, following the frenetic movement of the machine's body mass. One... two. One...

Pap!

With a shower of sparks and a sharp ping, the leg busted off from the main body. Lyra took advantage of the attack to rip off the mechanical arm from its left side, her voice rising in a roar as she planted her stance and used her full bodyweight to lift and yank the heavy arm off its joint. The sentry slammed heavily into the ground, tilting towards Lyra's side.

Moss reloaded quickly and took aim to fire again. Just as his finger squeezed the trigger, the machine's other legs finally managed to find their grip as it scrambled back up. His shot was off, hitting the main body and ricocheting off.

Fuck.

"If you're going to do something do it now!" Moss called over his shoulder, reloading again as he watched Lyra leap onto its bad side. The Worgan was tearing into its side, but the machine seemed unphased by the sparking wires and gushing oil pooling at its base. Behind he heard the guide sputter something as they flipped through their book but the catkin didn't hear it as he lined up another shot. The machine however, had finally taken notice of him and its other arm struck out at him.

It snagged his prosthetic, yanking his leg out from under him and sending the shot wide. The bullet missed the sentry's twitching head, shattering a light fixture several yards away instead and showering sparks from overhead. Moss tumbled backward, his head striking the ground with a crack, the iron collar protecting his neck but bouncing painfully off the back of his skull.

The sentry began to wind its arm back, drawing Moss closer to it. Blinking back the pain spiking through his skull, he fumbled to eject the spent casing out and reload Dawn Breaker – only to grasp air. Panic surged through him as he frantically searched for the weapon, spotting it resting near the edge of the wall and well out of his reach.

Shit!

He sat up, hands working the belts wrapped around his leg and letting it slip free, just as the machine was drawing him within striking distance of its still working legs. He bared his fangs at it, scooting back as it tossed prosthetic away and towered over him. While its lens locked on Moss, the remaining arm snagged Lyra by the scruff, dragging her kicking and snarling off. She was tossed aside as the machine pulled itself closer to Moss, static and sparks thundering from it as it tried to speak in words Moss couldn't even understand.

Fuck!

He kicked out with his good leg, pushing off of the machine's own as he scrambled back. However, he couldn't get far, the oil leaking from the machine clinging to his hands, soaking his cloak, and keeping him from getting a grip on the marble flooring.

SHIT FUCK!

He peered around, searching for anything to use to defend himself as its wheeled leg came crashing down near his own – but there was nothing in the hall. The only thing at hand were the parts ripped from the sentry and his satchel of ammo, but throwing it at the mechanical beast would be wasted effort. He looked back at the machine, its head tilted to the side in an unnatural manner as it crackled some auditory nightmare. Moss bared his fangs at it and braced himself for the inevitable kick or stab.

But that would never come.

Instead, a hot blast of light shot past Moss. He instinctively ducked as it blazed overhead and slammed into the sentry sending it rolling back and away from him. In an explosion of light, it crumpled. The hard casing melting and collapsing into itself as mechanical components shrieked in a horrible sound that grated on his ears. With a final thrash of its mechanical arm, it collapsed into a twitching pile of limbs and sparks.

Moss stared at the smoldering pile of metal in surprise. Peering over his shoulder Moss caught Val staring back with a smug look on his face, snapping the book shut. The spirit he had summoned seemed equally pleased, patting Val's head in a teasing manner before fading away as it was dismissed.

"Told you I wasn't useless," The guide said with a grin and Moss couldn't help but reciprocate it with his own.

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Val had to admit; they may have gotten a bit close there. The spirit he had summoned – a stubborn Cultivist who had studied light magic and protective fire spells – had almost refused to help upon seeing the environment he had brought them to.

"You just brought me here to blast some mechanical spider?" They had said, "Not even going to ask me how my day has been?"

It was stressful trying to convince them to hurry while watching Lyra get tossed by the sentry and Moss almost getting crushed under its foot. But, eventually he convinced them that he would summon them somewhere far more pleasant to discuss lesser important things.

Still, seeing the apprehensive Moss react positively for once to something he said made it a win in his book.

“Still took your damn time to do something.” Moss quipped.

Brat.

“Well I had to wait for the most dramatic moment,” Val responded, with a toss of his hair and flourishing gesture with his arm. Moss huffed a small laugh – another win – as he tried to stand up. It didn’t appear to be an easy task; Moss’s cloak was laden with oil making it weigh the small teen down while it also caused him to nearly lose his balance as he tried to stand upright.

The guide went to step forward, but stopped when Moss’s expression became weary of the man. Val shifted from one foot to the other, weighing his options as he thought about offering to help, but before he could, the trotting steps of Lyra interrupted him. The unease Moss dissipated as he turned to face the wolfkin.

Then immediately replaced with annoyance as she smacked the back of his with his prosthetic.

“Hey you lost this.” Lyra said coyly as the catkin snatched it out of her grasp. The Worgan gave him a toothy grin as he cursed her under his breath, but remained standing close as to let him steady himself against her as he reattached it to his leg. While waiting Lyra turned her attention to Val and was looking him over, her eyes strangely serious as she did so. When her eyes locked with his own, she stared for a moment before nodding with confidence before turning her attention away.

Weird?

“Well, where to now?” Moss said, putting weight on his leg to test the limb before pulling away from Lyra.

“I was actually thinking we should rest for a bit.” Val said, “I need a moment to make some notes and wrap this still.” He lifted his arm in a gesture to draw attention to the cut Moss had done earlier. It had stopped bleeding, but dried blood stuck to his hand.

Moss rubbed at his neck, looking at the wound then shifting his gaze to the ground. He flicked the edge of his cloak, sending oil splattering down. “Yeah.” He said, “and I guess I should get this cleaned up.”

“And maybe eat something?” Lyra asked, tail wagging behind her as she gave Moss a tilt of her head and the biggest puppy dog eyes she could muster.

Val chuckled as Moss rolled his eyes, agreeing with her only to be cut off with a screech as Lyra picked him up and slung him over her shoulder.

“Let’s go then!” She whooped, side stepping all of the debris from the sentry.

They found a safe space to hunker down in – some shop that sold travel guides to various places – and set up just behind the counter so they were out of view. Moss was still spitting and growling about being carried like a sack of potatoes, but Lyra simply sat him down with a pat to the head. The atmosphere of the group seemed to have shifted and Val was relieved to see both teens being relatively relaxed in his presence. Moss seemed content to sit near him without looking like he was about to flee in a moment's notice. He had pulled off his cloak and was attempting to dry up the oil with some paper towels they had pilfered from the shop's backroom. Lyra was the most relaxed of the two, lounging against the small marksman while nibbling on some hunk of dried fish Moss had pulled out from somewhere.

Val busied himself with pulling out his first aid kit and cleaning his arm. The injury was long, but not too deep and he was quick to wrap and bandage it. The sleeve though was ruined – now stained brown and split in two up to his elbow. He rolled it up with a sigh, hoping maybe they would find a convenience store somewhere in this place that he could get a sewing kit from to repair it. When he looked up, he caught Moss staring at the injury with a frown on his face.

"You got me good back there," Val said lightly, getting a grunt in return as Moss turned back to his task. Since the conversation wasn't dismissed, Val pressed on. "You're both pretty good actually. You intercepted that sentry pretty fast."

"We're not just good." Lyra said perking up at the praise and giving him a proud grin, "We're the Foundry's best. None of the other assets can even hold a candle to us."

"Assets?" Val echoed, giving them a confused look.

"It's what they call us." Moss replied, he had paused his work and was running his fingers through the cloak's ruined fur while the Worgan herself simply nodded in response.

"Kids who show potential move up and become assets. We're important." Lyra added on.

"So there are other kids who work with you?" Val pried, jumping on this chance to learn more about them. "Is the Foundry a type of orphanage?"

"Hardly." Moss scoffed but didn't expand upon it. Lyra instead took the initiative.

"They help kids find work." Lyra explained as if child labor was a naturally occurring thing. "Kids without homes or packs get brought to the Foundry, and the Foundry helps them find their place."

Val frowned at this new knowledge. He had heard of places still utilizing barbaric means of slave labor, but to find children willingly working in that situation made his stomach turn. It was clear Lyra had no qualms about her situation; she seemed happy to talk about them as if it was the best thing that had happened to her. A sad thought by itself. Moss, though, had grown quite with his eye focused on the floor in a dazed look. Val recognized the expression he wore, a deep look of tiredness that spirits often had after ages spent trapped in the same unchanging state.

Val was pondering how to get Moss to offer his own opinion on the Foundry's fucked up practices, when the catkin winced. "Fuck," he groaned, rolling his shoulders trying to move the collar as his fingers brushed a particularly soar spot. "Fuck this thing. It's a miracle I'm not concussed."

"I have some Icy Hot if you want?" Val offered, digging through his overpacked first aid kit and offering the topical cream to the teen. Moss stared at it, but cautiously reached out and took it from the Guide. He rolled the cylindrical tube in his hand before looking back at Val in confusion. "You apply it to where you're soar." Val explained, reaching to tap the metallic device around Moss's neck. "Though, it might be easier if you would remove that collar-."

"NO!"

Val had just barely extended his hand when he had to swiftly yank it back from Lyra's snapping jaw. The audible clack of her teeth alerting him of the amount of force she was fully intending to use on him had he not been faster. The once lounging Worgan now fully alert as she glares down at him with enough hostility that Val scoots further away from them.

"You can't remove his collar!" She snarled.

"Okay, okay!" Val said, holding up his arms in surrender. "I won't touch his collar." He turned to Moss who was still holding the icy hot. "You can still apply it around it, just use your hand to massage it underneath." Moss nodded minutely, following through the motions in silence. He sighed softly as it began to work, handing the topical agent back to Val to pack away. Lyra resettled, leaning against Moss but the feeling of ease Val had felt amongst them was gone.

A moment later, Moss shoved the cloak off his lap and stood up. "Let's hurry up and see what's at the end of this corridor then get back." He vaulted the counter, leaving the cloak behind and taking point as the other two fell into step behind him.

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As they continued, they briefly discussed where the spider bot might have come from, and why it was in such shit condition. Perhaps another group had gotten to it first? Obviously, they had failed to destroy it the first time. Had it been following the Titan employee? Simon Martin-Whatever? What did Glasses Man do to piss it off?

The man Simon had taken off before they could get anything substantial from him, but all agreed that the moment they saw him again they would drag some answers out of him. Val had tried to find another spirit who may have some wisdom in regards to Titan or machines, but in the end, he found none who could shed some light on the topic. Instead, the man was now scanning the pamphlets he had grabbed for any fruitful information.

"Looks like we are heading towards customs." Val said, gesturing to what appeared to be a layout of the floor they were on.

“Customs?” Lyra echoed, tilting her head to the side. “So, it’s a place about traditions?”

“No,” Val corrected with a wave of his hand. “It’s like a security check when traveling to make sure you aren’t moving any contraband into another country.”

A security check could pose a problem. One of the few things they always avoided when traveling were the law enforcement agencies. While Moss hated the Foundry, they were right on how annoying and impeding officers were in their work and that it was best to lay under the radar than deal with them outright. There were several instances where they had harassed Lyra for simply existing in a part of civilization that wasn’t prone to Worgan. There were also a few he had to dispatch to avoid either being caught or to intercept a target from their care.

The signs on the walls grew in intensity, listing out several things followed by several images of the items crossed out. Moss didn’t give them any mind besides a sideways glance. It would take too long to parse out what was stated and if it was important he’s sure Val would detail it out for them. Moments later they were crossing into what Moss would assume was customs, though it seemed far more lackluster than what he was expecting.

The room itself was a simple, open plan layout. Arrows and ropes offering a path for them to travel through led to a line of booths and mechanical devices that Moss was unfamiliar with. Several ghosts loitered behind the booths, standing stock still as they stared blankly ahead. A ghost in a similar suit to the clerk from earlier appeared beside them, gesturing into the room with a blank smile.

“Please head to the nearest free booth!” They said with a nod, “Please do not hold up the line!”

Moss glanced behind them, frowning. They were the only ones here? Who were they holding up?

Val thanked the spirit and began to follow the roped path, zig-zagging back and forth in the most inconvenient manner Moss had ever seen. Lyra was on the same page as Moss, choosing to merely push through in a straight line. She knocked over the poles holding the rope as she went, stepping over them as they clattered to the floor with Moss following in her path of destruction.

Upon reaching the row of booths at the other end, Lyra stopped. Her ears flattened as she growled at the mechanical devices up ahead.

“What’s up?” Moss asked, keeping his voice low as he watched Val continue his steps through the now ruined maze.

“Those things are loud,” Lyra said, “Don’t like this, Moss.”

Moss nodded in agreement. Although machines never scared her, he recognized that certain ones caused her discomfort due to her heightened hearing. “Let me go through first

then.” He said, “see if there’s anything I can do to turn it off or if we can just get through it quickly.”

As he approached, he saw that much like the clerk booth as before – the computers were dead. The only machine that seemed to be on was a large archway that they would have to walk through. Each booth was manned by a single spirit who seemed more concerned about staring into the empty room than of them. The spirits by the arch way though, were staring directly at him. They were dressed as security, Kevlar vests and a baton holstered to their hip.

Moss attempted to move past them but was halted by the clerk spirit manning the booth who took notice of him only when he was within grabbing distance.

“Passports, please.” The spirit said calmly, offering their hand out. Moss curled his lip, about to tell the spirit to fuck off when Val pushed past him.

“Let me handle this,” he said quietly, turning to face the spirit and offering one of the pamphlets to them.

The spirit looked over the pamphlet, scrutinizing it for a moment before turning to their monitor and punching a few keys on the dead screen. After a moment, they turned back, face returning to that gods awful smile. “Thank you, Val Halmore.” They returned the pamphlet to him and gestured for him to walk forward, “Have a safe journey.”

Val nodded at the spirit, before turning to Moss and pressing another pamphlet into his hand. “These spirits don’t seem to be aware of what is going on. If we play along, we can slip right through with no issue.” Val explained before waving for Lyra to come closer. The Worgan hesitated, creeping slowly towards them but keeping her ears flat as she took a pamphlet from Val. “Just hand that to them and follow my lead.”

Moss watched Val move to the guard spirits, who motioned for him to walk through the arch. When nothing happened, Moss turned to the clerk patiently watching them and handed the pamphlet to them. The spirit did the same thing as with Val; looking over the pamphlet before punching some keys. When they were satisfied the proper number of keys were hit, it turned back and handed the pamphlet back to him.

“Thank you... *Moss*. Have a safe trip.”

Moss’s own ears were now pinned back. How the fuck did it know his name? Before he could retaliate, the spirit was already turning away from him and facing Lyra. He turned and walked towards the archway, ignoring the guards and heading straight towards Val who was waiting on the other side. He made it two steps through the arch when an ear splitting shrill suddenly erupted from it.

“CLASS 4 WEAPON DETECTED! LOCKING DOWN!”

A gate came crashing behind Moss, cutting the path back to the main room. The guards however, phased through with no issue and quickly closed in on Moss.

"Surrender your weapon!" One yelled, baton in hand as they drew closer.

"Fuck off!" Moss spat, drawing Dawn Breaker just as a roar from the other room erupted.

Moss caught sight of Lyra launching herself at not one, but two of those sentry robots. Both fully functioning and without support to cover her. The one she had thrown herself at easily maneuvering around her as the second grabbed her by the back of her head and slammed her into the tiled floor.

"LYRA!" Moss screamed as she remained limp, trying to dodge past the guards only to be grabbed and pulled back. With a yell he slashed at them with his blade, but it just whizzed through their transparent form.

"Comply or you will be detained!" the angry spirit shouted, its massive voice echoing within the vaulted chamber.

"Kiss my ass!" Moss roared back, trying to twist his arm free from the ice cold grasp that had him. He drove the blade where the spirit's heart would have been, seething as it phased through with little consequence.

"That won't do shit!" Val shouted at him. "Let me handle it!"

Moss dodged one of the guard's batons. It struck the arm of the other, freeing him and he was able to scramble back to where Val was hurryingly flipping through his book. Moss craned his neck to see where Lyra had ended up, but he couldn't see anything past the booths and crisscross pattern of the gate. He considered shifting Dawn Breaker into their rifle form, but with the guards approaching he would be at a major disadvantage. He shot a glance at Val, seeing that he had stopped on a red bookmark, reading over the notes he had made with concern.

"What are you doing?!" Moss growled, grabbing his arm to shake him. "We need to get back over there and help Lyra!"

Val hesitated, but nodded and began to call to the spirit. Another spirit began to coalesce into the dark dome, its form slotting into existence in thin strips of spectral light, however the form began to fail. It began to wail as its form wavered and twisted before being snuffed out as quickly as it had formed.

"What the fuck is happening..." Val stared at where the spirit had vanished, his eyes wide with horror as he whispered to himself.

"Try again!" Moss urged, dodging as one of the guards tried to make a grab for him. He nimbly escaped their grasp but let out a shout when he tripped over something on the ground.

He heard Val's voice as he tried to summon another spirit, but his words were swallowed up by a dull rumble. Moss didn't realize the guards had stopped perusing until it was too late, as dark tendrils suddenly erupted around them from the marble flooring. Beneath their feet, the floor began to melt, sucking them down like a tar pit.

Val tried to say something to calm Moss down, but he ignored them. Thrashing against the black tendrils that had latched onto his arms, legs, and Dawn Breaker. "No, no!" he gasped. "Lyra! Lyra, run!!"

He wasn't sure if Lyra heard him as he wasn't given time to hear a response. The world became a muffled blanket as Moss plunged downward. He could feel his stomach being left behind as the rest of his body dropped further into the complex. And then suddenly his feet were met by a surface, which was later joined by his knees. As the floor squished up against his face, Moss flailed to stay afloat for half a second before realizing he'd stopped sinking, and was now lying face down on another cold marble floor.

He thrashed up to his feet, panting. The first thing he spotted was Dawn Breaker, which rested only a foot away. He snatched it up and sank back into a defensive stance with the knife in his hand. The dark, shadowy tentacles were already receding back into the darkness. It was so dark that Moss's catkin eyes couldn't see shit as he wildly peered around to gain any kind of semblance of where he had been brought to.

At least, not until Val's glowing witchlight faded into existence beside him, illuminating Val's struggle with the black tentacles. The tentacles, having done their job, hastily slithered away back into the shadows, leaving Val swiping at thin air until they had fully released him.

As soon as Moss could see him, he was stomping over towards him with his teeth bared. "You lied! You can't do shit, can you?!"

Val took a step back, clearly unprepared for the catkin's hostility as he held up his hands in surrender. "Hold on! I wasn't lying! The summoning should have worked but something prevented it from actualizing."

"It was probably your own incompetence!" Moss snapped, "If you hadn't wasted so much time on that stupid ghost, Lyra wouldn't have been--"

Oh fuck.

Lyra!

Moss turned and tried to sprint past Val, but the librarian grabbed him by the arm and tried to pull him back. "Wait! We don't even know where we are!"

Moss acted on instinct before he could even consider it. With Dawn Breaker still in his hand, he plunged the blade into Val's flank, right up into the hilt. Val lurched in surprise; breath

caught in his throat as his muscles spasmed around the blade. In an instant Moss ripped the knife back out and staggered away as the realization dawned on him.

Val collapsed.

Moss stares at the unmoving form at his feet, feelings of regret curl in his gut but are quickly doused as it is replaced by anger.

He warned him not to touch him.

Moss turned and sprinted down the hall.

He told him not to.

The hall curved upward, a good sign that he was heading in the right direction and will hopefully end up back at the floor above.

It's his fault.

He slammed into a metal gate, the force knocking him back to the floor. "Fuck!" He leaps back to his feet, shaking the gate but finding it doesn't budge even an inch. "FUCK!" Moss rattles the gate, striking it with Dawn Breaker, fights to lift it up to give him a remote chance of getting passed.

It doesn't move.

"Lyra!" Moss yells, his voice echoing down the empty corridor. When no response came, he yelled again. He kept yelling even when his voice had grown hoarse. Eventually his strength went out and he fell to the floor, fingers still holding onto the gate. His body was trembling as he tried to think, but his mind kept going back to the same thought.

Lyra was hurt, and it was his fault.