

"So this place... The Starfix or whatever is Paleth?" Atto asked, walking along on tree roots. Alongside them walked the souls, white figures that all culminated into a single congregation as they trailed. The floor beneath them felt as if it hummed, soft and low, with a newly formed energy that the purple Grem had never felt. Like a new world, it didn't feel like Palleth beneath endless stars and a tensed calmness that clung to the air.

"It is, yes. Whatever benevolent being who made this realm created it to contain the damage. Protect the rest of our home from further chaos. It's just you and me." The mysterious figure who held onto their being like a secret spoke. They walked along the same dirt path as the rest of the walking figures below. Their hands cupped behind their back as they glanced up at Atto. "I fear, however, whoever it is that's keeping it contained is losing strength. I don't know how, but I can feel it..."

It was true. Atto had begun to feel the pull since he'd arrived. It started small, a call of sorts, like a cry for help, but the more they walked to who knew where, the more the threads were fraying. The stars flickered in and out when he looked up, the false night sky that blanketed the land that he once called home. His question of where he'd ended up had long since been answered. Waking up on the floor of a store destroyed was not just a lie; it was real. The same building, dare he even say.

He was knocked out by whatever likely held this dome now. Protected, or rather brought here for whatever reason, he'd not been told yet. The lopus stranger knew. He had a feeling they did. Holding onto some secret in fear he'd run away. Back down from a fight despite his history, which even they knew, but was there something more? How much did they know?

"Where are you going to go when this is over?" They spoke, nearly making the purple Grem jump out of his skin as he glanced down. They had stopped walking, or rather, he had stopped walking mid-thought. The trail he'd tread stopped at the base of a large tree whose roots clung to a fallen hollowed-out mass.

"I'm going home." He hummed, jumping from the blue wood roots as he slid down the side of the dirt path. Long trekked before they had even arrived, like it was built for the journey long ago. "My husband is probably worried sick about me. I just... Hope he's not that worried."

His ears slackened, a recessive rush of blue that ran through his body at the thought of his home. His husband was sitting quietly at their bedroom window, looking out longingly. Could the outside see the bubble? A capsule that held him captive, that likely took others like a shadow. Is that what these all were? People who weren't as lucky as him? No, he couldn't think like that. He couldn't just assume he was going to die here for some strange reason, but there had to be an end to it. Right?

"Atto." Oh, right, he was getting lost in his thoughts again.

"Ah- Sorry. Ever since the war, I've been really bad about-" His words stopped as he glanced at the star-flecked stranger. Their brows knitted tightly as they stared at him with a look

of concern. A crack in their demeanor, like they were fighting back, saying something. "What's up?"

"Come with me." They didn't even wait for him to talk before they grabbed his hand. They pulled him off their original path, spirits not giving a single glance their way as they ventured off the beaten path into the trees. Weaving through the large stumps that towered over them like a menacing God that leered over them. "I haven't been entirely honest. I haven't told you why you're here."

Why was he here? Why was any of this happening? He had dozens of questions. Ones they had simply deflected and ignored with their own that masked his. He'd hoped answering theirs could get them to talk. Speak to him in some sort of way about the truth, but all this time, so much walking. They were silent.

"I'm sure you are wondering what's going on. Why the moon had been eclipsed for these last few days. The truth is that Lapsus is waking up, and all of Paleth will die if we don't stop it." It was too much. Too much information was being dropped onto him in a short time, like he was supposed to understand. Lapsus was waking up? Was he brought there to fight a God of all things? Since his late wife, he'd stopped being ok with violence. He'd changed. For himself and his now husband. He didn't want to fight someone else's battle again!

He stopped, pulling his hand from the mysterious stranger's hold. They'd been dragged to a field, filled with flowers that danced in the still air with trees that towered over them like an arch of leaves and time. What the hell was the purpose of bringing him there? Why did the Gods choose him to fight the beasts that slept? Ready to destroy their home, the place they loved most.

"No, no, I can't fight the Gods. I swore off violence long ago, I can't." He spoke, trying not to raise his voice, but the nerves dug under his skin. It made his scars ache with pain like a painful memory that haunted him. Bugs crawling under his skin that itched and crept, tugging him on, but he couldn't. He wouldn't.

"I know, I know, but you need to. Think about Paleth. Think about your *husband*." The stranger begged, turning faster than Atto could react with pleading eyes that stared at him behind blue hues.

His husband. His rock. The reason he'd changed and grown as a person. If he didn't step up, take on this challenge that the Gods chose him for, he'd die. They all would. Friends he'd made, love he'd lost. He couldn't fight it. He couldn't just say no and walk away like he knew where to go when impending doom loomed over them. It exhausted them, and time was ticking.

"Oh... Fine. What do I need to do?" Atto caved, not from pressure but from the knowledge that the world rested on his shoulders. It wasn't a choice; it needed to be done.

The stranger's ears perked like Atto had offered his very soul. Shaking off their arms as they smiled before motioning for the large purple crook to lower his head. Their hand glowed,

like stars that floated in their hold, and a heavenly glow to it. He'd known the moment they left that whoever this companion he'd gained was they weren't normal. They were odd and filled even now with secrets as they placed their hand on his forehead.

"I'm giving you the ability to fight the Gods. This is not a gift but a curse. You will be something great. You will save us all." They spoke, like an incantation, as their fingers graced his head. A surge of pain rocketed through the man's chest like his heart was being squeezed. Whatever the hell they were doing to him, it hurt, nearly enough to make him collapse as it boiled his burns. His fur was growing faster than he could even register, and the weight of his arms was pulling him down.

This wasn't normal; this wasn't just strength being given to him. It really was a curse that bore his teeth, broadened his shoulders, and glittered his nails and feet until the pain disappeared. Only a deep longing drifted behind, as if he could feel the floor beneath him speaking to him. Voices from the distant light that wondered. He could hear the very world around them, and as he opened his eyes, he had changed. He had grown in size, his body shaking as he regained his bearings. The mysterious stranger is now much smaller than before.

"What did you do to me?" His voice came out in a low gravel, like a bark rather than words. His chest heaving as he shook off his large head and flopped around like a weight.

"I helped us save the world."

Word Count: 1404